how soon is now?

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/37475881.

Rating:
Mature

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Categories:
Multi, M/M

Fandom:
Dead Poets Society (1989)

Relationships:
Charlie Dalton/Knox Overstreet, Chris Noel/Knox Overstreet, Ginny Danbury/Chris Noel, Charlie Dalton & Ginny Danbury, Todd Anderson & Charlie Dalton, Richard Cameron & Charlie Dalton, Background Todd Anderson/Neil Perry

Characters:
Charlie Dalton, Knox Overstreet, Neil Perry (Dead Poets Society), Todd Anderson, Chris Noel, Ginny Danbury, Richard Cameron, Steven Meeks, Gerard Pitts, John Keating

Additional Tags:
Alternate Universe - 1980s, Private School, Compulsory Heterosexuality, Bisexual Charlie Dalton, Bisexual Knox Overstreet, Slow Burn, author is a cameron apologist, Coming of Age, Slice of Life, copious references to The Smiths, Period-Typical Homophobia, charlie dalton-centric, charlie dalton's parents suck, Emotional/Psychological Abuse, homoerotic staring as a love language, Pining, Not Actually Unrequited Love, Welton Academy, it's welton, but it's coed, it's the 80s ooo the 80s

Language:
English

Collections:
Charlie Dalton my beloved

Stats:
Published: 2022-03-25 Completed: 2022-06-13 Words: 36,353

Chapters: 9/9

how soon is now?

by tellingtragedy

Summary

Charlie's restless.

It's the poets' (and company) senior year at Welton Academy. The original plan was to shut up, sit tight, and wait for graduation. That's not very carpe diem of them, though, is it?

A story about falling in love (romantically and otherwise), high heels, and the not-a-few times Knox wanted to throw Charlie into the lake.

TLDR; Dead Poets Society minus the Society and it takes place 30 years later instead.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1: tennis, trigonometry, and todd anderson

Chapter Summary

early september, 1988

Chapter Notes

this is a passion project of mine influenced almost entirely by my love for the smiths' music and for my love of charlie dalton, and others. et cetera. I don't have much else to say other than that I hope it's fun to read.

It's September 5th, 1988, and that morning, Charlie Dalton's senior year started to look like something special. His outlook changed when he arrived at the familiar Welton tennis court and found himself face to face with a stranger.

Todd Anderson was his name—Charlie would find out a few minutes later, taking pity on him (he didn't even look like he knew how to *hold* a tennis racket) and introducing himself.

"Charlie Dalton," he'd told him, as though the name spoke for itself. For most of the students at Welton Academy, it did.

He was infectiously likable, despite his notoriety among the faculty and a few of his less personable peers. His reputation followed him as closely as his shadow, mostly to his benefit. He wasn't malicious, or manipulative, and he gained this reputation by prioritizing relatability, banter, and, above all, novelty. Charlie had so many people in his corner because he made them feel like he was in theirs- and he made it impossible to forget he existed.

After a beat of silence and no response, Charlie bounced the ball on the ground, right next to the seated boy. The ball flew past his ear and prompted a few hairs to fall out of place. It got his attention, anyway.

"I'm Charlie," he repeated, as his new companion's head snapped up. "Who are you?"

"I'm Todd. Todd Anderson," he said, and it sounded laborious.

"You look like you're gonna be sick."

No response. He tried again.

“You’re new.”

That, at least, earned him a nod. Charlie sat down next to him.

“Did you play tennis wherever you came from? Because you look about as out-of-place as a jock on an ice skating rink.”

“I did,” he said, as if to quickly come to his own defense. “But not—but not for very long. They did—they didn’t—I wasn’t very good.”

“No?” Charlie bounced the ball again, this time by his own foot. He twisted the racket in his fist. “We’re both a little early. Let’s see what you got.”

Todd looked absolutely terrified at the prospect, but something about Charlie’s grin must’ve convinced him, because he followed him onto the court, sweaty racket in sweaty hand.

“You do know how to play, right?”

“In theory,” he muttered, then flushed when Charlie barked a laugh.

“The trick is making your limbs do what you know they’re supposed to,” he said, and Todd almost smiled. “Just don’t second guess yourself so much. I can already tell that’s an issue, huh?”

Todd gave no reply except for a grunt of ascension. Charlie abandoned his racket and the ball on the bench and took his place on the other side of the net, the sun in his eyes.

“You ready?” he asked, stretching his left arm across his chest. “I’d like if we could try to get a good rally going before the others get here, but if we just get through stretches, that’s fine. Maybe he’ll let us start early.”

Todd nodded, copying Charlie, who shook his head and laughed quietly to himself.

After a few arm stretches and lunges, Charlie decided that was probably enough and, retrieving his racket and ball, asked if Todd was ready.

“Sure,” he replied, voice breaking.

“I’ll serve,” Charlie told him, and Todd’s shoulders visibly relaxed.

Tossing the ball into the air, Charlie shifted his grip on the racket and raised his arm to hit it over the net to Todd.

The ball flew back and forth across the court successfully only four times before the ball hit the end of Todd's racket, causing it to fall, clattering, from his grip. Charlie made his way around the net to retrieve the ball.

"Sorry. I don't—I don't know what happened," Todd stammered, picking up the racket, and Charlie shook his head.

"I do," he countered, bounding over to him. "You're holding the racket all wrong. Give me."

He grabbed Todd's wrist and the racket, twisting it in his grip, and forcibly moving his fingers until he was satisfied.

"You've been holding it Western, you should be holding it Eastern," he said, and Todd offered him a blank stare. "That's what—never mind. Just hold it like this, okay? Trust me."

He jogged back around as Todd stared at his hand.

"Ready to try that again?" he asked, and he was met with a determined nod.

He served the ball again, and Todd already seemed more confident. He met each return more assuredly than he had before, and more importantly, the racket stayed firmly in his hand, even after his clumsier attempts. Charlie even thought he saw him start to smile.

It wasn't long until several of the other boys began to appear in and around the courts, and they abandoned their game in favor of waiting for the coach. Charlie's old coach had retired the year prior, so all were curious to see who would take his place.

Eventually, the mystery man appeared, looking less than impressive amidst the younger, more athletic-looking boys. He was shorter than average, yet he had such a strong presence that you could scarcely fail to notice him. Charlie immediately felt himself drawn to the strange character, who did not readily demand the boys' attention. Instead, all of them had quickly acknowledged him on their own, waiting along the baseline of one of the courts. He carried a bag of tennis balls on his right shoulder, and wore a visor. He made his way around them, whistling all the while. Eventually, he stood before the gangly group of confused boys, and turned to face them.

“Morning, lads,” he said, receiving a few scattered responses from the group. “I’m John Keating, and you can call me either, or, if you’re slightly more daring, ‘Captain.’” A few of the boy snickered at this, primarily out of confusion. “I know you don’t know me yet, and I don’t know you, either. Nonetheless, let’s get something done today.”

The boys nodded, and a few, Charlie included, voiced their assent.

“I’m told all of you have played tennis at Welton before,” he said, “except one. Everyone welcome Todd Anderson.”

Everyone turned to look at the obviously unfamiliar face. Todd’s cheeks flared red where he stood beside Charlie, who grinned and patted him on the shoulder reassuringly.

“Seems like someone’s already welcomed him in,” Keating said, with a smile. “What’s your name, young man?”

“Dalton, sir,” Charlie said. “Charlie Dalton.”

“Well, then,” he said, nodding. “I’ll get to know all of you in due time, certainly. Let’s get some blood pumping, why don’t we? Laps around the courts; five minutes.”

The boys collectively groaned, all except Todd, who was (unsurprisingly) silent.

“Oh, come on, let’s see some enthusiasm! Are you athletes or sea cows? It’s not a test, you can’t fail. Have fun with it, get to know each other.”

That was different, to be sure. Their previous coach hadn’t exactly encouraged a collaborative community among Welton’s tennis boys—he often preferred instead to pit them against each other, thinking it would somehow make all of them better players. It had mostly just caused more fights during matches (particularly doubles), and during practice, mostly between the varsity and junior varsity players. Charlie tried to break the mold, frequently taking younger or less experienced players under his wing and teaching them outside of practice. Todd was his newest project.

“You’ll do better with the new grip, I think,” Charlie said, sidling up alongside Todd. “And loosen up. You’re stuck in one stance, so it’s harder to move around.”

Todd nodded, speeding up to match Charlie’s faster pace. “I—uh—I

appreciate it," he said, after a beat. He hesitated a second before adding, "Do you know Neil Perry?"

Charlie had to laugh. " *Know* Neil Perry? Yes, I know him. He and I go way back," he said. "You—wait, you're *that* Todd?"

They'd been back at school for less than a week, so Charlie hadn't yet met Neil's roommate- or so he'd thought. Neil had offhandedly mentioned a Todd, once or twice, and named him as his new roommate, but Charlie hadn't really had a chance to ask anything else, let alone meet him. From the looks of it, it wasn't exactly his fault. Todd probably wasn't the kind of person to try to meet new people on purpose.

"What do you mean?"

"Neil's roommate! This is *great* . Looks like you're stuck with me, Anderson."

And Charlie was nearly certain he saw him grin.

Twelve hours and six miserable classes later, Charlie was in the library with four of his favorite people, and absolutely none of them had any idea what they were doing.

Their pet genius Steven Meeks was their best bet, as usual, and he stood over Knox's shoulder, who had been staring at his trigonometry book for what might've been forty minutes.

"Cosecant is the reciprocal of sine," he explained, with shaky patience, " that's your problem-"

"I *know* that," Knox argued. "Wait, no, isn't it the— repro—"

"Reciprocal—"

"—the reciprocal of cosine?"

"No, that wouldn't make any sense, it's the measure of the angle of the line perpendicular—"

"Slow down," Charlie interjected, "don't scare him."

“Funny,” Knox retorted. Charlie winked at him.

“Cosine is secant. Sine is cosecant,” Meeks reiterated, losing patience faster now. “You just need to calculate—”

Knox interrupted him by dramatically throwing his pencil onto the open book, lead breaking on the pages. “Screw it all. I’m never going to figure it out. Start writing my obituary.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Charlie said, groaning. “I’m still alive, and that’s saying something.”

“Sure thing, mister honors scholar.”

“A blessing and a curse, truly.”

Seeing this banter begin, Meeks sighed and returned to his seat next to his platonic other half and Welton’s resident giant, Gerard Pitts, who took the opportunity to point out something on his own assignment and ask him about it. They often became their own unit, disconnected from the rest of the group.

“How was practice?” Ginny whispered to Charlie, after a miraculous (albeit doomed) moment of all five of them working in relative silence.

“There’s a new player,” Charlie told her, at a regular speaking volume. “His name’s Todd—Neil’s roommate Todd? Anyone get to meet him?”

To his surprise, Ginny nodded. “Neil introduced me. They really get along well already,” she said. “Better than you and Cameron get along, at any rate. How long have you known each other?”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “It’s not my fault he’s got a stick up his ass. He and I were *never* going to get along. Besides, I don’t have to get along with my roommate- Knox barely talks to his.”

At the sound of his name, Knox’s head popped up. “What?”

“Stick. You never talk about him.”

“Stick? No, he keeps to himself.”

“See?” Charlie said. “And you didn’t get along with your roommate last year. What was that chick’s name? Anna?”

“ *Hannah* . And I got along with her, she just thought I was after her

boyfriend all the time. Not my fault she dragged him into our room all the time."

"Just like I can't help how Cameron's always on my ass."

"You've made your point, Charlie," she conceded. "But I like my roommate this year. Her name's Chris? She's new."

Knox's head popped up again, and Charlie forced himself not to give it much thought.

"Chris?" he repeated, and Charlie frowned. "I think I have trig with her."

The way he said it made Charlie think that Knox was more than certain that she was in that class, but he didn't press him.

"Anyway," Ginny continued. "The point is, Todd's fine in my book if Neil likes him. He's a great judge of character."

"Sure," Charlie said. "and yet he's friends with me."

"Hilarious. We all know you're a fiend."

Charlie grinned, leaning back in his seat. "Well, Gin and gents, I'm exhausted. As much as I loathe to go back to my room," he added, earning a snicker from Knox. "I'll see you all here same time tomorrow I'm sure—Ginny, will Neil be here?"

"Yes," she affirmed. "He's doing his audition for the Taming of the Shrew tonight."

"Oh, sure!" Charlie replied. "He didn't even tell me. Did you audition?"

"I mean, I did. I'll probably be a nonspeaking role like, 'Italian Woman,' but I can't complain, because I don't know what else they'd give me."

"You'd make a great Katherine," he told her. "You're always arguing with me."

She smacked him on the shoulder as he stood to leave, ducking away from her abuse. "You might as well call me a rodent, because I know that's what you mean."

"How *shrew* d of you."

She barked a laugh, and Knox rolled his eyes. Charlie ruffled his hair as he stood behind him, and set his hand on his shoulder.

“Would you go to bed, Charles?” he asked, the suggestion of a smile on the corner of his mouth as he whipped around to look at him.

“If you insist,” he said, with ample fondness, and patted his cheek. “Tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow,” Ginny and Knox agreed aloud, while Meeks and Pitts nodded.

With that, Charlie walked away, leaving the library and stepping into the cool air of a September evening.

“ *Charlie!* Charlie!”

Neil’s shouting was audible all the way from the end of the hallway, through the open door of Charlie and Cameron’s shared room. It rose above the hum of conversation that could always be heard at this time of the afternoon, after classes had ended and before dinner had started, by anyone who was present.

He started from his spot on his bed, where he’d been lounging, carefully reading through the pages assigned for English. He abandoned the textbook capriciously on the pillow as he swung his legs over the side of the bed, and met Neil at the door.

“ *Charlie* ,” he said, one final time, clearly out of breath. “I got the part. I got him.”

“Lucentio?” Charlie asked, recalling a conversation before Neil’s audition where he’d raved about the play’s themes and his dislike for Petruchio, and his desire not to be typecasted as the comic relief. Charlie was unsurprised when he said he would audition for the more romantic of the show’s male leads. “God, congratulations, Neil. Of course, I knew you’d get it, you’re always amazing. I may not be an actor, but…”

A light blush painted Neil’s high cheekbones. “Thanks, but, you flatter me. It wasn’t easy.”

“What’s that?”

Had he been in a worse mood, Charlie would have rolled his eyes at his roommate behind him, sitting at his desk. But his excitement made him patient, and he instead called back:

“Remember I told you Neil was auditioning for *The Taming of the Shrew* earlier this week?” He wasn’t even sure if he had or not. “He got the part he wanted. Knew he could do it, don’t know why he gets so worried.”

He emphasized his friendly teasing with a light punch to Neil’s upper arm, and he played along (always the dramatic), rubbing the tender muscle in an exaggerated manner.

“Now he beats me,” he said, in a put-on injured tone. “And Ginny *actually* got Katherine. Isn’t that great?”

Charlie nodded and said that it was. “Have you told Todd?”

“Yes, I told Todd,” Neil said, like it was the most natural thing in the world. “He was studying, though. I felt sorry to bother him.”

“You were bothering me,” Charlie accused, though he didn’t stop smiling. “What makes Todd so special?”

Neil blushed again. “He’s uh- he’s my roommate, so I spend more time with him.”

A lousy response to be sure, but Charlie didn’t care. “He’s not much of an actor, is he.”

“No- no. He’s terrified of the spotlight.”

“Figures.” Charlie bit his lip. “He does alright on the tennis court.”

“I thought you said he was bad at tennis?”

“No, he is. But I’ll fix him up in no time,” he promised. “Besides, he’s out there playing, and that’s what matters.”

“I guess,” Neil conceded, and with apparently transcendent effort changed the subject. “If you have free time this semester…”

“I know, I know. I’m always welcome at rehearsals.”

“You got it,” he said, winking. “You’d be a real asset. You could help

with lights, and costumes, or sound and- well, whatever you do, you'll pick it up fast."

"Thanks, Neil."

Neil nodded, apparently pleased. "I'll see you, Charlie."

When he was gone, Charlie closed the door again, making his way back over to his bed and his textbook. He was conscious of Cameron's eyes on him the whole time, but he didn't say anything until he began flipping through the pages to find his spot. "Can I help you?"

"No," he said, almost too fast. "Lost in thought, I guess."

Charlie hummed with dissatisfaction, but whatever the reason, he stopped, and Charlie was satisfied. No need to poke the sleeping bear.

He was being less difficult this year, anyway—maybe Charlie would survive, after all.

"Hey, Charlie, do you—do you got a moment?"

Charlie stopped, turning his head to see Knox making his way over to him from his favorite study spot in the Grove. "I guess."

Knox had found him on his walk back from tennis on Saturday morning, around eleven, and Charlie knew looked awful. It was an unusually hot day for late September- one of those days when the heat drains the color from the sky and leaves you uninspired and lazy. His hair was soaked with sweat from the exercise, and his clothes clung to his body uncomfortably, which made him the unwanted subject of Knox's lingering attention.

"They make you practice in this heat?"

"Only on days that end in 'y'."

Charlie wanted more than anything to take a shower and collapse back into bed, but he didn't mind being delayed by Knox Overstreet.

Once, Charlie tried to remember the day they met. Not really the details of it, just the date, just to see if he could. With a little digging

done, he found it. September 1st, 1983, the first day of school and the beginning of Charlie's 7th-grade year, had been a Wednesday. Charlie hadn't always been the behemoth of popularity he presently considered himself to be, but he'd always had a natural charisma. Knox used to be shyer, more withdrawn- Charlie had met and befriended him mostly by coincidence, but after a few months of sitting next to each other in math and bonding over their shared dislike of the subject, Charlie had learned more about Knox than algebra. Knox was funnier *and* more interesting, anyway. That was the beginning of it- five years had passed, now. When Charlie did the math, and reflected on everything else, much later, he was surprised to discover it hadn't been longer.

He must've met Neil around the same time. As for Meeks and Pitts, it was by pure coincidence that Charlie could consider them his friends. It was all a matter of dorm placement, and of Charlie growing exasperated with his Latin homework and pounding on the door and begging for Meeks's help.

"Are you busy?"

"Not later," Charlie said, shifting his limbs uncomfortably. "Why?"

"Oh," he said, dumbly, and Charlie tilted his head.

"This isn't about Ginny's new roommate."

"No! No—how did you—?"

"You're not as subtle as you think you are. What is it, then?"

"Is it a crime for a guy to ask his friend to spend time with him?"

"Not a crime," Charlie clarified, in jest, "just highly inconsiderate. Honestly, *Knoxious,* don't you know I've got things to do?"

He flashed him a grin to make it clear he was joking. Nearly six years of friendship, with a nickname that had lasted just as long, and Knox still struggled to read his sarcasm. Charlie didn't mind accommodating.

"So? You're free *later* ? When's later, Charlie?"

"After I take a shower. I look like I got thrown in the lake. I feel worse. Actually, that probably wouldn't feel half bad…"

“I can make that happen.”

“Don’t you *dare* .”

Talks with Knox were always comforting. They both picked up after every summer break like it’d been three minutes rather than three months, falling immediately back into the endless conversation that exists between exceptional friends.

“I’ll eat lunch with you,” Charlie conceded, eventually, “as much as the thought of eating *anything* right now makes me want to die. When does autumn start again?”

“Twenty-second, isn’t it?”

“Not soon enough. I’ll die before then.”

“You’re so dramatic.”

“I’m serious. I’m at risk for *heatstroke* .”

“Then drink more water, Charlie.”

“Stop being right, and let me wither away in peace.”

The weight of hot air made it difficult to keep talking, so they contented themselves with silence for the remainder of their walk.

Charlie did end up passing up lunch, much to Knox’s exasperation.

“You’re an athlete,” he said, through a mouthful of his sandwich. “You need to eat.”

They were sitting on the green-carpeted floor of the library, hidden away by the bibliography shelves in the nonfiction section. Nobody cared about those old encyclopedias, not since the school brought in computers two years ago that served the same purpose, so they could be confident they wouldn’t be bothering anybody.

“I’m not hungry,” Charlie protested, for the third time that day. “It’s too hot.”

“Well, I’m still saving these for you.”

Charlie wrinkled his nose at the box of raisins Knox was referring to. “Now I want to eat *less* .”

“Suit yourself,” he said, as Charlie watched him toss the small box into *his* bag.

“You should come to my first game. At the end of October.”

“Is Todd playing?”

“Well, yeah, for Junior Varsity. I just practice with him.”

“Oh. Is it here?”

“Yep.”

“I’ll go. Why wouldn’t I go?”

“You might have something going on. Ginny and Neil have rehearsal.”

“Well, I don’t. I’ll be there. I like watching you play, anyway.”

“You do?”
“You’re so *aggressive*. It’s hilarious.”

“Tennis is very serious business, Overstreet.”

They were quiet for a moment, with Knox finishing his sandwich and Charlie tentatively snacking on the raisins. Still, the topic of Ginny’s new roommate—Chris Noel—lingered in the back of his mind.

“Didn’t you say you have trig with Ginny’s new roommate?”

As Charlie predicted, Knox started at the mention of the girl. He’d always been like this with girls- very shy, approaching the topic with doubt. Charlie *tried* to help.

“I… do. Chris. That’s her name.”

“I know her name, Knox. I’ve talked to her.”

“You have?!”

Charlie ignored his tone. “I’m friends with Ginny. Of course I have.”

“Don’t you think she’s…”

“Oh, yeah, she’s pretty. I’m not really interested, though.” Knox seemed astounded at the concept that someone might be ‘not really interested,’ but Charlie kept going. “It’d be weird to date Gin’s roommate, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Knox said, unconvincingly. “What was she like, though?”

Here we go again , Charlie thought, disheartened by the prospect of dealing with another one of Knox’s crushes. He became more miserable than usual.

Still, Charlie answered his questions. He’d always cave when it came to Knox. He’d always help him, to the best of his ability, despite his absurd and irrational reservations about it- especially when it came to his *crushes* . It put a smile on Knox’s face, and that was usually enough for him.

“Do you think she’d like me?” Knox asked, after a beat of silence, and Charlie rolled his eyes.

“Who wouldn’t?”

Chapter 2: the heel incident of 1988

Chapter Summary

early/mid october, 1988

Chapter Notes

hello again! it's been a week, let me tell you. writing this fic has become strangely emotional for me, because I graduate high school in a month. crazy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a late night for rehearsals when Neil and Ginny were finally freed by the director. Charlie, who had been dragged along to watch, was set free with them. It was dark by the time the three of them were making their way back to their dorms, with Charlie and Ginny walking side by side and Neil a few yards ahead, as per usual. Neil was carrying both copies of the script, but repeating lines from memory, and Ginny and Charlie talked minimally between long pauses.

"It'll be really great, I think," she said softly, about the production, just to say something at all. It felt wrong to speak over Neil—his joy was infectious.

"Yeah," Charlie agreed, squinting ahead at him and smiling. "With the cast and the crew and your director- yeah."

Ginny was the only one of the three still in the school uniform, but the October chill was finally settling in, and they each had their school coats on. Charlie had his hands stuffed in his pockets, and he wore his beret lopsidedly on his head.

Ginny had asked about and berated him for the ridiculous thing earlier. " *What* are you wearing," she asked, "or why do I feel like you're about to start speaking really awful French?"

" *Parle français bien* ," he replied, offended. "My French is fine."

She'd just rolled her eyes.

"I read that I profess," Neil said dramatically in front of them, as though they weren't there, " *The Art to Love*… while you, sweet dear,

prove mistress of my heart."

It was Charlie's turn to be affectionately annoyed.

"Say it louder, I'm afraid we can't hear you."

Neil laughed, and for the moment, that bright, cheerful sound was truly the only thing in the world. His cheeks hurt from grinning and his heart ached from a similarly pleasant ailment.

There was a point beyond the last class buildings where, unless you were to take the long way (which was something most students only did when the ground was muddy or covered with snow), the walkway ended. Charlie and Neil easily stepped over the uneven ground in the dark, but through *some* misfortune, Ginny found the unruly root of a red oak tree with the heel of her black suede pump.

She was on the ground comedically fast, bringing Charlie down with her, her hands clinging to his coat.

"What happened?" There was Neil, cutting off his monologue and running back uphill towards them.

"That damn tree," Ginny said, gritting her teeth in pain while she gripped her ankle.

Charlie pulled himself up, leaning against the trunk. "Thanks, Gin."

"I'm sorry. You were the closest thing to grab onto."

"A little warning next time?"

"With any luck, there won't be a 'next time.' Maybe if I wasn't wearing these shoes—"

Neil knelt by Ginny, squinting to see in the dusk. "Is it badly twisted?"

"No," she said, as Charlie offered his arm to her for use for balance. "It just hurts like a bitch. Charlie, why don't you switch shoes with me?"

She laughed at her own (apparently very funny) joke, and Charlie frowned at her feet. "Maybe it's not the shoe's fault. Maybe you're just clumsy."

"Very funny, Dalton. You wanna hit the ground harder next time?"

"My apologies."

Neil was examining the offending tree root when Charlie called him. “Come on, Perry,” he said. “The princess needs her beauty sleep.”

At this time of evening, sneaking the two boys up to Ginny’s room wasn’t terribly difficult. It helped, of course, that they’d done it a thousand times before. Once, they’d fallen asleep early on the floor and gave Ginny’s old roommate quite the shock when she came back from dinner.

“Why don’t we ever sneak into *your* dorms,” she protested as she rounded the corner cautiously, stepping into the corridor. “It would be easier. There’s only one of me, and two of you.”

Because Cameron’s a snitch, Charlie thinks, but instead, he goes for: “The girls’ dorms smell better, anyway.”

“Are you quite certain you don’t have any *ulterior motives* , sir?”

“Quite. It’s your dorm, nothing scandalous happens *here* .”

The three of them cautiously shuffled into the room Ginny shared with Chris, who was, unsurprisingly, bewildered at the appearance of Charlie and Neil.

“Charlie,” she said, choosing the boy whose name she *knew* to address first. “Ginny, how did you—?”

“Ginny, *please* tell me she knew we were going to come here after rehearsal—”

“She does now, Neil,” Ginny answered, unhelpfully, as she tossed her jacket on the back of her desk chair. Charlie shook his head fondly.

“Sorry, Chris. I figured she would’ve *told* you,” Charlie offered, unhelpfully, after he, spinning on his heel, sat down at the foot of Ginny’s bed. Neil, with less exaggeration, sat down next to him.

“You’re alright,” she said to him, quickly, and then to Ginny, “How are they going to get out?”

“Same way they always do,” Ginny retorted. “The *door* .”

“We can go,” Neil suggested, hurriedly, and Chris shook her head.

“No, it’s okay. I just wasn’t expecting three of you… how was rehearsal? You’re not in the show, are you, Charlie?”

“He isn’t,” Ginny explained, “but Neil likes to have him around. No clue why.”

She was sitting backward in her desk chair, with her arms crossed on the back. Charlie swatted at her.

“Rehearsal was great,” Neil supplied, undoubtedly happy at the opportunity to talk about theater. “Everyone’s really making progress. Ginny and I both have a lot of lines… we’ve got time, though. Before we need to be off-book.”

Chris nodded. “I’ve never read it,” she admitted, “but Ginny showed me her script, I looked through it— I’m excited to see it.”

Charlie had to admit that she was charming. She was very animated, even when talking about things that clearly didn’t interest her much, just for the sake of Ginny and Neil. There was a vivid image in his mind of a hopelessly lost Knox in their shared trigonometry class being effortlessly drawn in by her quickness, patience, and willingness to help him. Knowing him as well as he did, and talking to Chris now, he understood.

“There was a bit of an incident on the way back,” he said, as Ginny’s face colored. “ *Somebody* tripped and decided to take me down with her.”

“It’s because of these stupid shoes,” Ginny lamented. “You understand, Chris.”

“Of course,” she said, immediately adopting a similar tone. “I mean— I’m used to it, but one time, I was walking just outside and—”

“Was it that tree? I bet it was that tree,” Ginny interrupted. “Point is, I wouldn’t have tripped in flat shoes.”

“I still think I could manage,” Charlie quipped, grinning when she fumed. “Then again, I don’t think I could prove it. They don’t exactly make them in men’s sizes, do they?”

“It’s worth a shot,” Ginny said, angrily. “Put these on, you twat.”

Charlie leaned back as she threw her left heel at him, and it hit Neil instead, who just shook his head and laughed.

“Go on, Charlie.”

Chris put a hand over her mouth to stifle her giggling. “You do have small feet.”

“Watch it, Noel,” he snapped, though he was laughing as he took off his shoes and socks. A challenge was a challenge, after all, and Charlie was never one to refuse.

Neil wrinkled his nose, grinning. “I can’t believe you.”

“You’re just jealous that you couldn’t pull these off if you tried.”

“Do they actually fit?” Ginny asked, incredulous. “You—oh my god, do we have the same shoe size? Neil, give me his shoes.”

“Leave my shoes alone.”

Chris helped Charlie stand up, laughing as she noted the slight increase in height.

Neil stood up too, only to prove that Charlie was still shorter than him.

“Obviously,” Ginny said. “They’re not miracle workers. They’re not *stilettos* .”

Both girls laughed, and Charlie was unamused, as he usually was when his height was the subject of ridicule.

“I’m not that short,” he argued.

“It’s okay, Charlie,” Ginny said, with faux gentleness. “I love all five feet and seven-and-a-half inches of you.”

“Five *eight* ,” he corrected, but she wasn’t listening.

“You need socks,” Chris said, after a moment of staring pensively at Charlie’s reflection in the full-length mirror. “You’ll blister.”

“I’m not *wearing* them long enough to blister.”

His protest was ignored, and Neil laughed as he blanched at the sight of Ginny and Chris excitedly digging through the latter’s dresser.

“Come on, Charlie,” he said, “this is fun. You’re having fun.”

He snatched the hat off of his head playfully, putting it on himself. Charlie rolled his eyes.

Neil was absolutely right, though. There was a rush that accompanied doing something like this—something that would give his father, and the school's administration, a heart attack. Excitement burgeoned in his chest like vervain flowers.

"Do you think he'd look good in pink?" Chris asked jokingly, tossing a pink stocking over her shoulder.

"I think he'd hate all of these," Ginny answered, carrying on as if neither Neil nor Charlie was in the room. "Oh, look at these."

Unable to say no to either of them, Charlie soon found himself tugging on a pair of Ginny's silk socks. They were baby blue, with a stark navy plaid pattern on top. They were ridiculously comfortable and (Charlie loathed to admit it) they *did* make the shoes more comfortable.

"You can *keep* those," Ginny said, and Charlie laughed. "I'm serious. I don't even want to look at those socks ever again."

"They can't go in *my* laundry," Charlie replied. "That would be something, though."

"Throw them away, then, I don't care."

Chris shook her head, pulling Charlie to stand again, holding both of his hands in either of hers. She smiled radiantly, looking down from his face to his shoes.

"Much better," she declared, while Neil and Ginny shared an amused look behind him. She twirled Charlie around like a dancer, causing him to duck and then very nearly to fall, something greatly entertaining to Ginny, who barked a laugh as he stumbled.

"Not as easy as it looks?"

"I didn't know she was going to do *that* !"

Chris steadied him with her hands on either side of his waist as she laughed at Ginny's remark. "I had to. Look at you—look at him, Gin," she implored. Ginny shrugged and replied, in a wry manner, that she would not.

"He's beautiful," Chris asserted. "You're so beautiful, Charlie."

In hindsight, none of it had ever been a good idea. Still, once the idea burrowed itself into Charlie's mind like some particularly clingy bur clover, it wouldn't leave him alone. No, it was a *great* idea, if only because he meant well.

He caught Ginny between classes the next day, having come upon this brilliant plan of his.

"You're going to do *what* ?"

"Come on, Gin. It's for a good cause."

"I didn't say I didn't like the idea. Still, they're going to kill you."

"I've got it all worked out. You can wear my shoes."

"You've got yourself a deal, Dalton."

There was a school paper that went out bi-weekly, with information about school events, local events, and other minor policy changes. Charlie was one of the proofers—not by choice, but it took up a relatively small amount of his time, so he couldn't complain. Especially not now, not when it gave him this golden opportunity.

All this is how, on Thursday afternoon after classes, he found himself justifying himself to Meeks in the computer lab as he made the necessary addition to the paper.

"It's an article about the dress code. It's important," he explained impatiently. "You have to agree that it's useless *and* outdated."

"I don't understand. Why not just petition the board?"

" *Petition the* — that's hilarious, Meeks. Tell another joke. They'll just say that they haven't had any of the girls complain about the shoes, which is a *lie* , and move on with their lives."

"Don't you think they'll know who did it?"

"I sure hope so."

"You *want* them to know?"

"Obviously. I'm not just gonna wear heels for fun."

“Wear-”

“It’s a protest, Meeks. A protest against the girl’s dress code.”

“Nolan’s going to have a heart attack.”

“Serves him right. Maybe he’ll reconsider the whole thing when it’s a guy wearing the

shoes instead. Isn’t that a thought?”

“It’s definitely something.” He was quiet for a moment as he watched Charlie type. “Wait, where are you going to get heels?”

“I’m swapping with Ginny.”

“They’re not going to fit,” he said, incredulous.

“They do,” Charlie countered. “I’ve already tried them on.”

“You’re crazy.”

“Thanks,” he said, as he approved his own edits. That blooming excitement had returned to him, giving him a new surge of confidence. As for the consequences, he hadn’t given them much thought. He would be able to handle it, certainly. Then again, he’d never done anything quite like this before.

Charlie instinctively tensed whenever he heard the telltale creak of an opening door, but relaxed immediately when he discovered the source.

“Knox,” he said, smiling. No need to worry about *him* . Then again, he didn’t feel like debriefing anyone else on the subject of his intentions.

“Charlie,” he replied, playing with the cuffs on his sleeves. “Can I talk to you?”

“Sure.” Charlie glanced sideways at Meeks, just to say *No, I don’t know what he wants* , and Meeks shrugged.

“I need to get some homework done,” he said, grabbing his bag. “See you. You too, Knox. Oh, and, uh—good luck, I guess.”

Charlie thanked him quietly and reluctantly watched him leave.

“Sorry,” Knox apologized, looking back at the door as Meeks pulled it

closed behind him. “I thought I’d find you here.”

“You thought right, Overstreet. What’s bothering you?” he asked, as Knox sat down next to him.

“Um– you know. Regular things. The same thing,” he explained, hurriedly, and Charlie frowned.

“Chris?”

“It’s—yes. It’s her.”

Charlie rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “What’s wrong?”

“I think I want to ask her out. Like, to go out with me.”

“Obviously,” he supplied. He hated seeing Knox so worked up about these things. Though he couldn’t see the value in falling over himself for a girl he barely knew, he failed to see the problem. Knox was handsome and nice, and he *was* plenty smart, even if he didn’t act like it. Waste of time or not, he should have no trouble getting a girlfriend. “So what’s the problem again?”

“I don’t know how.”

“Don’t know how?” Charlie said, raising an eyebrow. “You said you have a class with her. At *least* one. Just sort of… happen to walk out right after she does, strike up some conversation about how math is hard, and then ask her if she’s busy this weekend.”

“You make it sound easy, Charlie.”

“Because it is!” he exclaimed, before patiently adding, “It is, Knox. You’re overthinking it.” Knox could be a nit, sure, but he was his friend.

“Maybe for you. The girls love you,” he retorted. “She’ll laugh at me.”

“No, she won’t. No matter how badly you screw it up, she won’t. She’s nicer than that,” Charlie said, trying to be comforting. “Listen, if you’re afraid of being laughed at, practice on me. I’m not afraid to tell you you sound stupid.”

“I can’t pretend to *ask you out* —Charlie, that’s not gonna work.”

“I’m serious. Pretend I’m Chris.”

“Guess I’ll have to close my eyes.”

“Don’t be rude. I’m beautiful.”

Knox laughed, and Charlie was just glad to have gotten his mind off of his self-induced trepidation.

“Do you really think it’ll help?” Knox asked, anxiously.

“I know it will. Hit me with your best shot, lover-boy.”

Knox was still visibly hesitant, but Charlie could tell he’d been convinced.

“Um—hello, Chris?”

“Did you forget her name? Try again.”

“Sorry, uh- hi, Chris.”

“Hello.”

“Well, uh, that test was pretty difficult, wasn’t it?”

“I thought you said you studied?”

“Charlie, stop making this difficult on purpose,” Knox accused, crossing his arms. “She’s nicer than you are, this isn’t going to work.”

“I’m *not* ,” he argued. “Fine. I’ll ‘be nice.’”

“Thank you.”

“Okay, well—sure, the test was difficult. I’m sure you did great, though.” He offered a wry smile, and Knox glared, but otherwise ignored him.

“Thanks. If I did, it’s thanks to you,” Knox replied, and Charlie could tell he was more easily picturing Chris in his mind. The affectionate tone he adopted made Charlie’s head spin—just getting into character.

“It’s nothing, Knox.”

Knox paused. He was playing with his sleeves again. “Hey, uh, do you have anything going on? Tomorrow? Because, uh, I don’t, and I was wondering if you—”

Charlie stopped him by holding up two fingers. “Why are you talking so fast?”

“I’m nervous.”

“Why? It’s just me.”

“It’s… I can’t *do this* with you.” Charlie’s breath hitched as Knox stood up quickly, sending his chair sliding back behind him. “I’ll figure it out myself, okay?”

“Yeah,” Charlie assured him, dumbly. “You will.”

“Of course I will,” he reiterated, louder than before. “Do you think I can’t?”

Charlie felt hot. “You need to calm down.”

Knox looked down at him apologetically. “I didn’t mean—” Again with the sleeves. He started again, after a long, awkward moment. He spoke softly. “Thanks for trying. Really. I want to… where should we go?”

Charlie, still reeling from Knox’s mood swing and his own confused thoughts, had to take a moment to register that he’d been asked a question. “That spot. In the library.” *Their spot.* “Bring her a gift, too. Then it doesn’t matter where you go.”

Knox nodded. “That’s—I think that—”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe you’re right. Maybe it is easy.”

Charlie didn’t answer him.

“Who am I kidding. You’re always right, Charlie,” he said, and Charlie reluctantly smiled at him. “I’m sorry. Thank you. I couldn’t do this without you.”

Then there was one, as Knox left the room just as quickly as he had arrived.

Charlie didn’t know why he was crying.

He saw Knox again the next morning, almost passing him in the hallway on the way to class.

“Did you do it?” he heard himself asking, as Knox came to a stop in front of him.

“Not yet,” he answered, glancing down. He eyed him suspiciously. “You’re taller.”

The culprit, of course, was the pair of black suede pumps on his feet that he’d borrowed from Ginny, all according to plan. After much deliberation, he’d elected to wear the blue socks after all, as opposed to his own. It was a wonder Knox hadn’t noticed yet (unlike everyone else who’d stared at him as he walked down the hallway), so Charlie gave him a playful kick to the ankle.

“Ouch—what was that for—? what are you *wearing* ?”

“They’re Ginny’s. Have you seen the paper yet?”

When he shook his head, Charlie launched into the details of the plot, as well as why it necessitated him wearing women’s footwear, watching as his eyes danced and changed from bewildered to amused in the span of a few words.

“Of course you did,” Knox said after he’d finished. It wasn’t an accusation, and it held no malice. He was merely very, very familiar with Charlie’s work. “Don’t get yourself in too much trouble, okay?”

Charlie shook his head. “You haven’t even seen the start of it, Overstreet.”

They were called to the auditorium before noon.

The dean, Mr. Nolan, looked like an overboiled egg, as per usual, but it didn’t take a close examination to confirm he was pissed. Most every member of the administration did. The self-important air to all of them- it made Charlie fume.

He lingered behind, hiding while the students got settled into their seats and the faculty got comfortable on their notional thrones at the front of the hall.

The clicking of his shoes felt much louder in the empty hallway. He knew he wasn't much further off the ground than he would be in his ordinary shoes, but it was something else altogether that made him feel like he was floating.

He could hear Nolan's voice through the heavy wooden doors.

"...The responsible parties have until the end of the day to come forward…"

He pushed open the doors, and the dean fell silent. An entire hall of faces turned to look at him, but he stared ahead at Nolan, fighting the urge to seek Ginny out in the rows of seats. He knew her eyes were on him, too.

He cleared his throat. "Sorry I'm late, sir."

There was muttering throughout as Nolan found his voice. Charlie fought a smile.

"Mr. Dalton," he said, with carefully controlled fury. He wouldn't mention the shoes— not now. Charlie knew he wouldn't give him the satisfaction. "Take a seat."

His omission didn't take away from the scene Charlie knew he was causing, however; curious and astonished gazes followed him to his seat, saved for him by Knox and Ginny.

"Attention whore," she whispered affectionately when he sat down. He smiled. The gossip still pervaded, until Nolan began to speak again.

Though it was now glaringly obvious who was responsible, Nolan adamantly refused to let Charlie cause a scene. As everyone else was concerned, he'd already succeeded. Knox was looking down and sideways at his shoes.

"There will be consequences," Nolan finished, eventually. Charlie felt his rodent eyes on him.

"God, Charlie," Knox whispered. "Don't die, okay?"

Charlie didn't look at him. He wasn't afraid of Nolan.

"The guy's two bad coughing fits away from a casket," he murmured. "Don't worry about me."

He didn't mind that he did, though.

There were, in fact, consequences.

Charlie leaned his head back against the wall as he sat in Nolan's office, waiting for him to finish his all-too-important 'things to do.' He could be in class right now, or doing homework, or *anything* other than this endless waiting. Alone. He crossed his ankle over his knee, looked at his pointed shoe, and smiled.

He closed his eyes, and he must have dozed off, because he woke with a start at the sound of the door slamming behind the dean as he walked into his office.

"Mr. Dalton," he said, seriously, and Charlie rolled his eyes, looking sideways at the wall. "That was a ridiculous stunt you pulled."

"I'm not sure what you're talking about." He didn't look at him.

"I don't know what your problem is with the lady's dress code at this establishment, but you can't wear women's footwear." He sat down behind his desk, still fuming.

"Can't I?" Charlie said sarcastically, pointing the high-heel-clad foot on his knee towards the ceiling. "I'm wearing them, aren't I?"

"I don't find this humorous, Mr. Dalton."

He'd already dug himself this deep. Might as well keep going.

"I'm serious," he said, making eye contact with him. "Why can't I? I mean, it fits."

Nolan glared at him, and Charlie could tell he was harkening wishfully back in his mind to the days of corporal punishment. The corner of Charlie's mouth twitched briefly into a smile.

“I hope you haven’t imagined that this *prank* will lead to any changes here,” he spat. “The uniforms are traditional. There have been only minor changes since Welton was founded—”

“Respectfully,” Charlie began, though the look on his face implied it was meant as anything but, “Welton is a hundred and thirty years old —”

“I see no reason why—”

“—and even just twenty years ago it didn’t have a computer lab, or a tennis team, or typing classes… it didn’t even allow girls until nineteen years ago…”

“Mr. Dalton, you understand I’ll have to contact your parents about this behavioral infraction. I’ll make a phone call this evening.”

Charlie fell silent.

“And you’ll serve detention every day for the next three weeks—”

“Three weeks?!” he interrupted. “I’ll miss tennis practice *three times* —”

“—and you will no longer be working on the annual.”

Charlie saw that one coming.

“Sir, I can’t miss tennis practice.”

“You very much can. I’ll speak with your coach about the circumstances. You can make up the practice missed in your own time.”

He stared at his shoe again.

“I don’t know where you got those,” Nolan continued, “but I expect you to return them to her promptly.”

He only nodded, thinking, briefly, of how Ginny hadn’t been caught wearing *men’s* shoes.

He didn't bother looking at his roommate when he returned to their shared room at the end of the day. He let his belongings drop to the floor, too tired to care about the great *thud* his books made and the clattering of his pencils. He sat, stewing, in his desk chair, holding his head in his hands and massaging his temples.

Naturally, Cameron found it impossible to ignore the clamor.

"What happened?" he asked from where he sat at his own desk, and if Charlie didn't know better, he would say he sounded concerned.

"I know what you're going to say, so you better get out with it or shut up," he said through his teeth, closing his eyes. He had a pounding headache from holding back tears. Tears of what? Embarrassment? Frustration? Charlie would have loved to know, too.

Cameron was quiet for a moment, and Charlie thought he might get his way, but he couldn't be so fortunate.

"You're still wearing them."

Charlie started, confused, turning around to look at him, before realizing what he meant. He glanced at his feet. He had yet to take off the shoes.

"Why not?" he said, quietly, staring at the floor. "It can't get any worse."

"What'd he say to you?"

He furrowed his eyebrows. "I have detention for three weeks."

"That's it?"

"He called my parents. Look, I don't know why you get off on me getting in trouble—"

"That's not what I'm doing," Cameron said, defensively. "I was just asking."

"Sure you were," he snapped. "Leave me alone."

He turned back around fully to resume his previous position, trying to soothe his aching head. He could feel Cameron's gaze boring a hole into the back of his head. He almost never wanted to take the shoes off. Maybe, just maybe, he'd prove a point. He had a strange thought that part of what he wanted to achieve didn't have anything to do

with the dress code.

“I just,” Cameron said behind him after a pause, starting very suddenly and stopping himself just as much so. “I think you’re crazy, Dalton.”

“Never been said before.”

“But—” he started again. “I mean—this time—I think it was the right thing to do.”

Charlie didn’t answer him. There was nothing left to say.

“Charlie?”

Todd’s soft, inquisitive voice sounded from behind him on the walkway. In a cruel twist of fate (or just Nolan’s scheming), his detention had let out right when tennis practice did—not a second sooner or later. So, it made sense Todd had encountered him on his way to his room.

“Todd,” he said, smiling despite his frustration. “How was practice?”

“Fine,” he replied, looking strained. “It’s not as fun without you.”

In the twelve practices they’d had since the beginning of the year, Charlie’s affinity for Todd had only grown. Between Neil and Charlie’s combined influence, he’d gotten a little more bold, even if that only meant he wasn’t afraid to call out to a friend walking a few yards ahead of him on the path.

“Sorry.” Charlie put his hands in his pockets. “What did Keating say?”

Todd shrugged. “He just—he just asked where you were, and I told him.”

“Nothing to that?”

“No.”

Charlie started walking again, gesturing for Todd to follow.

“You know,” he started, shaking his head. “Nolan’s so set on not changing the shoe requirement, but not a single person noticed that Gin *wasn’t* wearing heels on Friday.”

Todd glanced at him. He’d been one of the most shocked parties immediately after the *incident* , though Charlie knew it wasn’t because he was scandalized. Maybe, Charlie thought, Todd might just think he was brave. “No,” he said, quietly. “I guess not.”

“So Keating wasn’t angry?”

“No. He said he was concerned.”

“Really?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ll see him on Saturday, at least,” Charlie said, grimacing. “I’m going to miss two more practices. I didn’t even do anything *wrong.* ”

His companion, dressed in tennis garb and carrying his racket, started turning it over in his hands thoughtfully. Charlie raised an eyebrow.

“How are you feeling about all of it, anyway?” he continued. “Anything go seriously wrong today?”

Todd winced. “Not really. I think—I don’t know. I just didn’t have a very good time.”

“I’m glad to know I was missed,” he joked. “I’m going to try to get some extra practice this week. Especially with the first game coming up…”

He trailed off, Todd staring at his shoes beside him.

“You’ll do fine, though,” he encouraged him. “You’ve already improved a lot…”

Realizing he was talking to himself, he fell silent again, feeling very suddenly like he wished the earth would open up beneath him and swallow him whole. The silence soon became too much for him to bear, however. “Do you think Knox will come?” he asked, more to himself than anyone. “He said he would.”

Todd didn’t respond for a long moment, and then, “How would you feel if he didn’t?”

That was a thought.

“Like I’d really wanna hit him,” Charlie replied, honestly. “Then again…”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“I thought he was your friend?”

“The closest,” he affirmed, making a face. “He thinks he’s in love with this girl.”

“Thinks?”

“I *know* he isn’t. He can’t be. He just met her.”

Todd looked at him, with a perceptive, canny look in his eyes Charlie wouldn’t be able to describe until months later, the realization hitting him like a train by a lake in New York. Todd was frighteningly perceptive—Charlie supposed it was a small compensation prize that came with being criminally shy.

“He’ll get over it,” Charlie assured himself out loud. “He will. He’ll be there. He has to be.”

“Yeah. I hope he is, Charlie.”

The way he looked at and spoke to him made him feel known to such an extent that Charlie had an exceptional feeling Todd knew more about him than he knew himself.

He felt great agitation at the idea, and attempted, in vain, not to think about Knox and Chris for the duration of the walk.

Chapter End Notes

> no comment is too short/long, any feedback is EXTREMELY appreciated! we as authors wanna know what you think. have a wonderful weekend, everybody.

Chapter 3: is it really so strange?

Chapter Summary

late october and early november, 1988

Chapter Notes

I've been. So busy. Crying. Enjoy :)

On a Sunday morning in early November, after Charlie had served his time in detention (which Ginny and Chris deemed *horrifically* unnecessary), he and Todd were at the tennis courts practicing with an audience of one. Why?

The end of October had brought embarrassing losses for Welton Varsity and Junior Varsity boys alike against Henley's boys, and Charlie endeavored to rectify whatever the problem was as soon as possible. He almost wished Knox hadn't come, if only so he wasn't there to see him lose.

So, he had found himself knocking on the door of Neil and Todd's shared room at five in the morning, half-asking, half-begging, for a practice partner. A reluctant Todd had groggily rubbed his eyes and changed while Charlie waited downstairs, and, to his surprise, brought an equally sleepy Neil down with him.

"What are you doing here?"

He shrugged, still looking very much asleep. Todd was wearing athletic-looking shorts and his tennis shirt, while Neil was still in pajamas.

"He wanted to come," Todd explained, and Charlie glanced between them, wondering, just for a moment, if there was anyone that would make *him* want to get up before sunrise just to spend time with them.

At the courts, Neil sat a few feet away from the edge, in a patch of grass by the fountain. Todd and Charlie stretched. Though he had no strong preference either way, Charlie enjoyed more private practices. They made him the intimate friend of his own thoughts, and in this instance, Todd and Neil wouldn't be intruders. It was too early in the morning for conversation.

They developed a steady rally of hitting back and forth, with Charlie

becoming vaguely aware of the fact that Neil had fallen asleep in the grass. Todd had improved a great deal over the course of a mere two months, and Charlie, though affording himself *some* credit, knew it was due largely to Todd's own effort, and Keating's unconventional yet effective methods. He taught it like it was a conversation, a tête-à-tête of sweat and the shuffling of tennis shoes. Charlie fell more in love with the sport than he thought possible every week.

They let Neil lay in the grass for hours while they practiced. There were breaks, but it wasn't until eight that they got company.

It was Ginny and Chris, coming down to the courts. They hadn't worn heels since the *incident* . A significant number of the girls hadn't, actually. Nolan was markedly silent on the subject.

As of late, Charlie had developed a strange, mixed reaction to the sight of Ginny's roommate. She had accompanied Knox to the match at the end of October, and as far as Charlie was aware, things between the pair were everything except official. The sight of her made him feel exceedingly dizzy, and his heart hammered uncomfortably in his chest, but it was Knox's face that flashed in his mind every time she appeared.

"Charlie!" She had one of those pretty smiles that could make a guy fall in love all on its own. Make *Knox* fall in love all on its own.

"Morning," he called back, squinting as he looked up at them. "Hi, Gin."

"Hello, pretty boy," she said. She ruffled his hair when she reached him. "You're up early."

"You two are just adorable," Chris cooed. She was almost glowing. "Ginny, why haven't you snatched him up yet?"

She and Charlie shared a look that must have conveyed some semblance of disgust at the thought, because Todd smiled, and the recently awoken Neil laughed.

"I mean, he's a real catch," Ginny said, "but I'm not exactly fishing."

Charlie grinned at the compliment, but nodded in agreement. "She's not my type."

" *Very* rude. You'll catch more flies with honey than you will with vinegar, Dalton."

“Well, just like you said, I’m not exactly in the market for flies.”

That made Chris laugh, too, and the churning in Charlie’s stomach subsided a little. Then she asked, “Where’s Knox?” and it was back as quickly as it had gone.

“Sleeping, I’m sure,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “It’s still early. He’s been a late sleeper as long as I’ve known him.”

“How long have you known him?”

“Six years.” His answer felt more like a defense.

Chris looked impressed, anyway. “Well, you must be very good friends then.”

“I’d say so.”

As if she could feel the heat creeping up Charlie’s neck, Ginny cut in. “Chris, have you ever played?”

“Hm?”

“Tennis. Do you play?” she asked again, and Charlie started to see what she was doing.

“Do you two wanna have a go?” He held up his racket experimentally. “You can borrow Todd and I’s. Just bring ‘em back, of course.”

Todd nodded as if to say he was fine with that arrangement, likely already planning how quickly he’d be able to fall back asleep when he got back upstairs. “Here,” he said, tentatively offering his racket to Ginny.

“I’ve never played,” Chris admitted, “but you make it look like so much fun, Charlie. Knox said you’re really good.”

“He did?”

“Of course,” she said, as if it was obvious.

“I half thought he forgot about me,” Charlie said, trying to sound very lighthearted. “Is he treating *you* well, anyway?”

The others looked at her, apparently just as interested in her answer as Charlie was.

“Well,” she said, “I think he’s very shy. He’s sweet. I think it’s… cute, though.”

“He is,” Charlie agreed, and he didn’t know which part he was referring to.

Ginny was bouncing back and forth on the balls of her feet. “Come on, Charlie,” she said, gently. “Wrap it up so we can play already.” She winked at him.

“Fine by me.” He rolled his shoulders. “Guess that means you’re free to go, Anderson.”

Todd smiled at him and told him that he’d see him later, and Neil, still wearing his flannel pajamas, plodded up the hill beside him.

Charlie trailed behind as Ginny and Chris started hitting, thinking only of a shower and a drink of water.

“So what’s the deal with Chris?”

They were in gym class, running laps outside and sweating like dogs despite the dropping temperatures. November brought with it a biting chill that made Charlie wonder why he hadn’t brought his jacket after all. His throat was burning with thirst, but he pushed the question out anyway as he ran at Knox’s side.

“I did what you said,” Knox answered, a smile on his chapped lips. “Well, mostly what you said. I gave her a present.”

“What?”

“I biked into town sometime—I would’ve asked you to come, but you were in detention.”

“Great.”

“Sorry. I was really lost without you, to tell you the truth—” becoming winded, he stopped for a breath. “I didn’t know what would be too much or what was *right* for a first date… not even a date, really, we just sat in the courtyard—”

“So what’d you *get* her?”

“I didn’t end up buying anything,” he admitted shyly as some overachieving underclassmen sprinted past them. “I picked some flowers on my way back.”

“That’s just like you, Knox.”

“What does that mean?” His face was red, and Charlie knew it was from a combination of things: embarrassment, exercise, and the cold. He gave him an encouraging smile because, for the first time, he understood that his approval mattered a great deal to him. It was a deeply comforting feeling.

“Nothing bad,” he said. “I talked to her on Sunday.”

“Yeah? Did she talk about me?”

“A little.” It wasn’t a lie. “I was hitting with Todd, and she and Gin came down to play a while. She said you’re shy.”

Knox blushed—appropriate timing as always—and looked at the ground. “Anything else?”

“Cute, too.” He made a face. “She asked how long I’ve known you.”

“Geez—it’s been at least five years, right?”

He nodded. “Almost six.”

“Feels like it’s been longer, doesn’t it?” As they leaned into the turn in the track, Knox naturally moved closer to him. “Doesn’t it…?”

Charlie said nothing, putting on a nervous smile.

They spoke very little for the remaining laps, sticking to simple subjects like homework and the weather and everything else Charlie talked about when Knox made him feel like that.

“Are you coming to study group?” Knox asked him in the locker room after, his hair wet and his gym shirt abandoned somewhere on a bench. Charlie had already gotten changed and, with nothing else to do but wait for Knox, stared at the wall as he replied, dumbly, that he was about to ask him the same thing.

“Yes. *Are* you?” Knox repeated, looking at him in the mirror as he fixed his hair. He made his stomach hurt.

“If you are.”

“Well, I am.”

“I’ll see you, then.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” He was smiling again, and Charlie couldn’t help but smile, too.

“Say ‘hi’ to Chris for me,” he suggested, dragging his mind away from Knox’s dumb smile and his joggers that always sat a little too low.

Knox pushed past him to grab his shirt and sweater. “If I see her,” he said, tugging on both of them, one after the other, over his head. “Six-thirty for study group, right?”

He hummed to agree that yes, it was, as he grabbed his bag. Before he could open his mouth for a proper response *or* turn back around, Knox started laughing behind him.

“Your shirt’s on backward, Charlie.”

He glanced down, only to affirm that he was right. “I’ll fix it later,” he said, pulling his back over his shoulder. “I don’t care.”

Knox shook his head, and he was *still* smiling, and Charlie thought that he’d never seen him in a better mood after *gym* class, of all things. It was becoming unbearably apparent what was making him so distracted lately, anyway. His stomach was hurting again for an entirely different reason.

“We should go,” he said, gesturing towards the exit. “We’ll be late.”

“Yeah,” he agreed, and the word stuck to the roof of his mouth.

He didn’t go to the study group.

He went back to the tennis court, under the guise of ‘needing practice’—that’s what he told Neil, anyway, when he accidentally ran into him on his way out.

The latter half of his day had been hell. Knox remained a ceaseless

fixture on the projector screen in the back of his mind. He felt top-heavy, keen on collapsing at the earliest convenience, but he knew he wouldn't be able to sleep if he tried.

(He didn't trust himself in bed thinking about Knox, anyway.)

He started hitting against the wall. The courts were empty.

(It was a sickeningly sweet thought, all things considered. He already knew he adored him, he just couldn't have guessed how much.)

He could still hit well, as lost in thought as he was. Convenient, because he had far too much to think about. He'd really done it this time, hadn't he?

Knox could hate him for it. Cameron would look at him with more scorn than he already did. And his parents—well, his parents might just kill him. That's if they ever knew, of course, and as far as Charlie was concerned, they never would.

But the thought was already there.

He was so lost in thought he didn't hear approaching footsteps, or even the first time his name was called.

"Charlie," came the voice again, closer, and he caught the ball in his left hand and spun around to face the intruder.

"Captain," he said, with a nod and a small smile on his face, out of habit. "What are you doing here?"

Keating nodded back at him. "To tell you the truth, Mr. Dalton, I thought I'd find you here."

"If you're worried about me missing those practices, I swear I'm trying to make up for it. I practiced on Sunday and—"

He shook his head. "No, no. Nothing like that. How are you? That was quite the incident."

Charlie flushed red. He and Keating hadn't talked about the *heel incident* yet. "Yeah," he said, looking at his tennis shoes and picturing the heels in their place. "The protest."

"Is that what you're calling it?" Keating asked, and Charlie started to open his mouth to defend himself before he realized that he was smiling at him. "Between you and me, I think it worked."

“You do?”

“I’ve only seen about four pairs of high-heeled shoes since, Charlie.”

He grinned.

“I am curious, though, if you’ll indulge—” Keating paused. “What gave you the idea?”

Charlie resolved to skip the part where he and Neil snuck into the girls’ dorms. “I was walking with my friends—Neil and Ginny—after rehearsal, and she tripped, and I guess I was just as upset as she was,” he explained, realizing at the same time as his mentor that it really was as simple as that. “She hurt her ankle.”

“I take it that she gave you the shoes.”

“Yes,” he admitted. “I don’t regret it.”

“Not even the public humiliation?” One glance at Keating told Charlie he was kidding.
“Not even that,” he replied, and he bit his lip to stop himself from smiling so much. “Especially if you think it did something…”

“Absolutely. The, uh—current administration, they don’t really mind if the girls wear the heels,” he said. “Just that you *did* .”

“Now they’re too scared to do anything,” Charlie joked. “In case I do it again.”

Keating nodded. “Exactly.” Then he laughed, seemingly at himself. “I meant to tell you that I thought it was admirable. I suspected you did it for good reason.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“You’re all right, Mr. Dalton,” he said. “Just don’t forget why.”

He ended up talking to Cameron.

On purpose, if it can be believed. He finally went back up to his room as soon as the ball became an invisible blur in the dusk and his arm

complained against the exercise after a lack of stretching. His giddiness from before had long since faded, and he was uncommonly lonely. A foul mood usually made him taciturn, but he was less content with silence than he had ever been. A side effect, probably, of wanting the attention of someone unlikely to give it to you.

“Do you do anything besides study?” Charlie asked, laying on his back on his bed and staring at the ceiling. His hands were folded over his stomach.

He felt more than he saw the blank look Cameron offered him before answering, “Why?”

“Just asking.” Cameron had been reading before Charlie opened his mouth, but he seemed more confused than annoyed. Still, both were obvious, and Charlie didn’t look at him.

“I do puzzles,” he said, slowly. “Sometimes.”

“Puzzles?”

“Like—those sudoku things. I do crosswords.”

It wasn’t the craziest thing that might’ve come out of his mouth, and Charlie wasn’t surprised—actually, it was so much like him that it was laughable. He just wondered how he’d never noticed any lying around. Then again, he hadn’t exactly been paying attention, had he?

“You any good?”

“I mean, I think so,” Cameron said, shrugging. “I used to play chess with Meeks, too, but—well. He’s busier these days.”

“Chess? My dad used to play me.” Charlie had no idea why he was offering this information. “Never could beat him.”

“Used to?”

“Soon as I was old enough to win, we stopped,” he said, then laughed. “Maybe he wasn’t as good at chess as I thought he was.”

“...Do you still play?”

Charlie glanced over at him. “By myself?”

“That’s what I do.”

“That’s—” He stopped himself from saying ‘pathetic’ and instead opted for “sad.”

“I guess.” Cameron put down his book. “So that’s a no?”

Charlie nodded, and to the agitation of every bone in his body, he sat up against his pillow. “Yeah, no. I don’t play *chess* by *myself* .”

After a beat of silence, Cameron offered, “You could play with me.”

It was obviously a question of ‘would you’ disguised as an offer, but Charlie found himself strangely inclined to accept it anyway.

“I’m gonna lose,” he said, meekly, staring at his hands. “I’m not even sure I remember how to play.”

Eventually, they were sat on the floor between their two beds, Cameron sitting with his back more or less straight and Charlie leaning against the side of his bed. Cameron’s chess set was between them. Because, apparently, Cameron had a folded wooden chess set under his bed. And apparently, Charlie remembered more about chess than he thought, because he needed only to ask about the initial placement of the pieces before launching into the game.

“I forgot my least favorite thing about this game,” Charlie said wryly. “The waiting.”

“Sorry,” Cameron said, obviously not meaning it. “You’ve gotta think about every move, several moves ahead—”

“I know. I just hate the dead silence.”

“Wouldn’t it be distracting to talk much?” he asked, still scanning the board thoughtfully.

“Not to me.” Charlie watched as he finally moved, closing in on one of his knights. “Besides, I already know you’re better at this game than me. You don’t have to play your best game ever to prove something.”

“I find it hard to believe this isn’t some kinda ploy so you can win.”

“It isn’t.” Charlie tilted his head, moving a pawn out to free his left bishop. “I don’t care enough for that.”

“You can’t trick me,” Cameron said, and Charlie thought he might be joking for once. “I’ve seen you play tennis.”

“I’m actually good at tennis. That’s the difference.”

He laughed at that, before cornering Charlie’s poorly defended king with his rook.

“Bastard,” Charlie said, under his breath. “Kidding. I’ll go down fighting. I’ll be the most annoying loser at chess you’ve ever seen.”

“Meeks was probably worse.”

It was Charlie’s turn to laugh.

The game dragged on until lights out, when Charlie finally surrendered, having sacrificed every one of his pieces until he finally surrendered (that’s how he put it, anyway; Cameron insisted that he didn’t have a choice in the matter).

“Thanks,” he said, without thinking much about it, when Cameron had finished putting the board and all its pieces away and they’d both gotten in bed.

He may have nodded in response, or even dismissed him with a ‘it’s nothing,’ but Charlie was ignorant to either after he closed his eyes.

Chapter 4: foyer phone calls

Chapter Summary

december, 1988

By early December, it had become increasingly apparent that Chris Noel and Knox Overstreet were, *officially* , dating. They weren't completely audacious about it, but they did enough hand-holding and general *touching* that Charlie just had to wonder what awful thing he did to deserve to have to see it.

He consoled himself (as he ate lunch *alone*) with the knowledge that, at least, he had Neil and Ginny's show to look forward to. The Welton drama department's performance of *The Taming of the Shrew* was slated for the second Saturday in December, and with the first tennis season over, Charlie wouldn't have to worry about the turnaround. He was enjoying the extra free time, too.

It became an odd ritual between Charlie and Cameron to play chess on Mondays—a convenient day when neither of them had any extracurriculars to go to after class. Charlie slowly improved, even beating him once, much to the latter's chagrin. Still, it came to a point where he almost found himself looking forward to it. Unbelievably, his roommate actually had a sense of humor, even if he often disapproved of *Charlie's* .

"Maybe I can convince my father to play me again during Christmas break," he suggested one day. "He'd have to actually like me for that, though."

"That's not funny, Charlie."

"It's true, though."

Charlie learned a lot about Cameron, and he shared choice bits of information with him, too—Cameron's father was a mathematics professor at UVM, and though he was home during the same months Cameron was due to the nature of his work, he was always busy. Charlie told him that his dad was a banker, earning a whistle of astonishment from Cameron.

"Does the money make up for the fact that he doesn't spend time with you?" Charlie knew him well enough by then to understand the layer

of sarcasm.

“He holds everything over me. He thinks that’s where I’m headed, too.”

“You, a *banker*? Or worse, an accountant.”

“What?”

“I just can’t see it.”

Charlie shrugged, laughed a little, and conceded that he couldn’t either.

He spent more time with Todd outside of tennis, too—whenever Neil was at rehearsal, the two would find something to do just for the sake of doing it together. Though their frequent hangouts were inspired by the absence of Neil and Knox, they enjoyed each other’s company for what it was, and Charlie considered Todd his friend. The fact that they were both missing someone else went entirely unspoken but completely understood.

By the end of that semester, Todd had wedged himself into Charlie’s heart and seemed keen on being a permanent fixture.

On Thursday after class, while Neil was at rehearsals, they braved the New England winter cold to take a walk around the lake. It might as well have been solid ice, but there wasn’t a bit of snow *or* mud on the ground, and the two were quick to take advantage of the conditions.

“ *Laissez-faire* ,” Todd read aloud. They were taking turns reading from the history textbook, trying to make their excursion excusably productive by studying for their upcoming exams. “an economic system in which the dealings of private parties are free from economic intervention by governments or special interest groups…”

Charlie huffed, and he could see his breath. “Wish they’d follow that rule *here* .”

The joke didn’t make much sense, but they were both mentally exhausted and glad for any excuse to stop rattling off definitions at each other, so they both laughed.

“Neil’s play’s on Saturday,” Todd said.

They both knew that, and it was pointless to say it, but Charlie

nodded anyway. “Then we’re on break.”

Todd was silent and he closed the book in his hands, folding it under his arm.

“I don’t want to go home,” Charlie admitted.

“I know,” Todd said. “Me neither.”

“Back again in January, though, yeah? And then we have the spring tennis season to look forward to.”

“Right.”

Charlie hadn’t spoken to his parents since they’d dropped him off in August. Not unusual, no—not for his family, anyway—but, concerning the phone call Nolan promised in October, he’d expected at least a call back. A reprimand over the phone was something he was used to at school *and* at home, when his father was away on some kind of business or another. He didn’t get any peace of mind from a stone-cold voice coming out of a receiver this time. Radio silence.

Knox had told him that it was probably nothing to worry about, and Ginny joked that maybe they’d finally given up on him.

“I wish,” he said, miserably.

“Well,” she said. “That means they don’t expect anything from you, right?”

He’d have been grateful to be with either of them on the night of the play, but Knox was off with Chris, and Ginny (along with Neil) was *in* the show. Meeks and Pitts might as well have been each other’s date, and as for Cameron, he didn’t go. So, Charlie went with Todd.

“How do I look?” he asked, after abusing his hair with a comb and hairspray to keep the straight bangs out of his face. “Fine?”

“Why are you asking me?” said Todd, innocuously. “Do you think you *don’t* ?”

Charlie looked at him and blinked. Todd looked back at the mirror in front of him and shook his head.

Much like the two weeks preceding it, the show went by quickly—the inevitable result of having a decent enough time when the rest of your life has a tinge of misery to it.

Todd disappeared to find Neil at curtain and Charlie, left to his own devices, stood outside the theater, pretending like he wasn't cold as he waited for somebody—anybody—that he knew to appear from inside.

Then Chris was next to him, leaning against the brick with her hands behind her back. Charlie didn't look at her.

"Hi," she said, and he repeated the word.

"Are you waiting for somebody?" she asked. He shook his head.

"Where's Knox?"

"I think he said he wanted to talk to the director, or something," she answered. "Something silly like that."

Charlie wanted to say something like *no, it's not silly at all,* but he wasn't prepared to confess something like that. "Did you like the show?"

"Oh, yes," she said, laughing. "It was so funny, don't you think? Ginny made a beautiful Katherine." Her blue eyes watched a car pull up to the curb. "Don't you think she was pretty?"

"I did."

"Ginny's friend, Neil—well, I guess he's also your friend—did wonderful, too," she added. "I didn't like the Petruchio all that much, though. He and Ginny—there wasn't a connection. I'm sorry, is that rude of me? That's probably an awful thing to say."

"Not at all," he said, turning his head. "I didn't think so, either."

She was wearing a blouse with those puff-shoulder sleeves, and it was light blue, accidentally matching his shirt. She looked like she might be cold, and, trying to be a good *person* , in some way, to make up for the fact that he was so angry, so *indefensibly angry* at her because Knox liked the color on her better, offered her his jacket.

She took it and smiled. Knox would actually be the one to return it, though it would be a long while until he did—months away in the future that Charlie couldn't predict.

"As long as you're not cold," she said, and Charlie affirmed that he was not.

Todd, Neil, and Ginny came outside all at once, and before Knox had

finished doing whatever it was he was doing, Charlie was whisked away, back to Welton.

A week later, Charlie was lying on his back on Knox's bed, turning some dead lavender around cautiously in his hands. Knox, on the other hand, was frantically moving about the room, having, as usual, delayed packing until the last minute—Charlie had been invited to *help,* though he knew better than anyone that he'd just get in the way. So, instead, he was getting into everything he could reach, and that included a collection of dead flowers on Knox's desk. He didn't seem to mind.

"Have you seen my—oh, thank you," Knox said, reaching for a bottle of cologne on his bed that Charlie had already stolen, examined, and then subsequently abandoned. Something like cedarwood and blue lavender (that's what it said on the back, anyway. The bottle was unopened.)

"Did you remember your tapes?"

"I didn't bring them this year."

"Why not?"

"I don't know," he said. "Maybe I thought it would help me focus more."

"Music helps *me* focus."

"That's you, Charlie." Knox packed some books into his suitcase. "You're different from me."

"Not a lot."

"You're smarter."

"*That's* just not true." Charlie sat up quickly, making Knox turn his head at him, and he carefully set the dead flower on his desk. "What makes you say that?"

He shrugged. "Everything you do. You're an *honors* student," he said

emphatically. “Things just come to you easily, is all.”

Charlie had to admit he was partially right—he’d skipped a number of study group meetings throughout the semester and had long ago made a habit of doing so, yet his grades always seemed to float comfortably in the low *A* -range. Above Knox’s *B* average, yes, but still below the high *A* ’s of his high-achieving friends like Meeks and Cameron. However, he knew perhaps better than anyone else that Knox, if nothing else, was determined. Any subject was his to grasp with enough hours (and *hours*) of studying—it wasn’t his fault if he didn’t have the time to understand what Charlie could figure out in fifteen minutes.

“ *C’* s get degrees, you know what they say,” Charlie said flippantly, shrugging. “And anyway—I don’t know what makes you think *B* ’s are bad, anyway. You’re doing better than eighty percent of the student body, I’d bet good money.”

Knox smiled at him then, and it was gripping.

“Why are you so nice to me, Charlie?”

“You’re my favorite charity case.”

He was folding up some shirts as he said it, and he threw one at Charlie, who laughed good-naturedly and caught it a few inches from his chest.

“I don’t need your pity, Dalton.” His face was unchanged—a permanent grin—until he turned back to his bag, moving his books to make room for the rest. “I *need* to finish packing, that’s what I need.”

“Don’t let me distract you.”

“That’s a laugh,” he said, shaking his head. “You’re never *not* a distraction.”

Charlie had started to fold the shirt himself. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Knox paused his careful arranging of shirts and schoolbooks to look up thoughtfully. “I don’t know,” he said, and Charlie blushed. “Maybe it’s because you won’t *shut up* .”

“My conversation is extremely riveting, sir.”

“Too riveting. I can’t *not* pay attention to you.”

“Well,” Charlie said with mock seriousness, stretching his arms over his head, “That’s a ‘you’ problem. I will, however, continue to be a permanent and encouraging figure in your life, never fear.”

“Great.”

“Oh, anyway, how did you do on your finals?” Get Knox talking about something that *wasn’t* him. “Trig?”

“One of my better scores, actually.”

“Sure!” Charlie said, surprised. “Thought you’d be too distracted with Chris.”

He frowned. “What—? Oh, yeah.” Charlie stared. “Yeah… yeah. I mean, she helps me. I want her to think I’m smart.”

The frankness of the confession made Charlie feel almost embarrassed.

“I think you’re smart.”

“I know. Thank you, Charlie.”

Knox turned back to his luggage with a kind of finality, so Charlie found something new to examine that wasn’t cologne or a dead flower —Knox, while he wasn’t looking.

After three minutes or so Knox seemed satisfied with his present arrangement of *things* in his bag, and he closed it, and at the sound of the zipper Charlie made an effort to appear occupied.

“Let’s go down for lunch,” he suggested, as Charlie picked lint off of his jacket.

“Can’t say no to that.” He made a blind effort to push down the hair at the back of his head. “Sure you got everything? Didn’t leave your whole drawer of socks behind?”

“I was *thirteen* ; that was years ago. When are you gonna leave me alone?”

“I already told you, Knox. Never.”

Ginny smuggled him into her room again that night.

“Chris left at two,” she said, even when he didn’t ask where she was. “Her parents picked her up early.”

Charlie just nodded and made himself comfortable on Chris’s (now stripped) bed. He stared at blank beige walls while she talked excitedly and at length about theater, recounting stories for half-deaf ears. He felt like he was passing through an inexorably interesting life that was entirely exclusive in which he was just a witness, and he recognized the feeling as one and the same with how he’d felt earlier in Knox’s room.

“I’ll be busy next semester—all the scholarship things, you know, and my college tours—but I want to do it again. Neil is, of course. There’s talk of doing a musical.”

“Can you sing?” he asked.

“Not yet,” she said, and then she winked. “It’s a shame *Into the Woods* wasn’t a few years older. We might’ve been able to snag the rights then.”

“That came out last year.”

“I know, that’s the trouble.” She took off her shoes and sprawled on her bed.

“What were they thinking of?”

“ *The Music Man* ,” she said. “Nothing wrong with it. I just liked *Into the Woods*. I think it’s very…modern.”

Charlie nodded.

“And, other than that, I think the large and varied cast would support our department—whatever. It won’t happen.” She laid on her side, her back to him. “Hopefully the next Shakespeare play they pick won’t be too boring.”

“You don’t like Shakespeare?”

“Not every show,” she said defiantly. “I’d go for anything else at this point. I wouldn’t complain about doing a period drama…”

He closed his eyes.

“How are things in your world?” she asked, eventually (were it seconds or minutes later, he couldn’t confirm). “How are you, Charlie?”

“Fine,” he said, and it was an ostentatious lie.

She rolled onto her back, and he turned onto his side to face her.

“Likely story, dear,” she said. “Who died?”

“My dignity.”

She laughed. “Don’t be so dramatic.” Another shift: this time, she sat up fully. “What happened?”

Charlie looked past her at the yellowing wallpaper that was becoming increasingly more offensive to him.

“You don’t have to tell me. I’ll just be here waiting and *suffering* until you decide to.” She bit her lip. “ *Charlie…* ”

He rolled his eyes, looking, with great effort, in her general direction. “Knox is—”

“What?”

“He’s the worst—he’s the worst guy I’ve ever met.” Ginny stared at him. “He’s ruined everything for me, because I think he’s…”

“You think he’s…”

“I like to look at him.” It was an undiluted admission. “I like the sound of his voice.”

She kept staring at him like she didn’t really know how to respond, and he couldn’t exactly fault her for that.

“I guess what I’m saying is that, if I was a girl… no,” he said. “If he came onto *me* , I wouldn’t exactly tell him off.”

“Christ. That’s a lot, Charlie.”

“Don’t I know it.”

She was still looking at him. “So, you’re queer.”

Charlie felt himself shrug. “I like girls.”

“You like Knox.”

He looked at her.

“I guess that’s true.”

“It definitely is,” she said, tilting her head. “Well, whatever you are, I don’t care. I guess I’m just…sorry.”

“You’re *sorry* ?”

“That it’s Knox,” she admitted. “Nothing wrong with him. Well, nothing distinct. Other than the fact that he has a girlfriend.”

“A minor detail, compared to the fact that if I ever told him, he’d never talk to me again.”

“I doubt that that’s true. He likes you too much. He’s also just—he seems like a pretty good guy, you know? I don’t say that lightly.”

Charlie sighed through his nose. “He’s just so… *attached* to Chris.”

“A shame and a tragedy. You’d be a cute couple.”

“ *Ginny* .”

“Deadly serious. He’d be lucky to have you. And really—I mean, so what? You’ve got a crush on your guy friend. It’s not the end of the world. A little bit for you, but, I mean, that’s all crushes, isn’t it?”

“Speaking from experience, Danbury?”

She chuckled and waved him off. “The heart is a fickle thing, Dalton, but it wants what it wants. If yours wants some Knox Overstreet di—”

“Stop.”

“—ck, then—”

“ *Stop that* .”

“—that’s really nobody’s business.”

“I can’t believe you just said that.”

“It’s okay, Charlie. I’m not much for guys in general, myself.” She

crossed her legs.

“Really?”

“Really. Girls have sweeter perfume, anyway.”

Charlie laughed. “More for me. Still, you’re not wrong.”

The next morning, and Charlie’s inevitable trip home, came sooner than he would have liked. Before he left, as both of them stood in the snow with their bags, Knox, very awkwardly and much to Charlie’s surprise, hugged him goodbye.

“See you later,” he said, all-too-casually, as he opened the passenger-side door of his father’s new Mercedes-Benz. Four-door. Not obnoxiously rich enough for Charlie’s family’s tastes.

“‘Bye, Knox.”

He waved goodbye through the window and, for all the time Charlie would spend thinking about it, he might as well have blown him a kiss.

Knox never made it easy for him.

The ride home was especially bleak.

His mother picked him up—Charlie didn’t expect any different. Chances were that Charlie’s dad wouldn’t even be home for Christmas, as usual, and he *never* picked him up from school. He liked it that way. However, with Charlie’s luck, this would be the Christmas that his father suffered a change of heart and decided he was a family man, after all.

His mother had always been a degree less intimidating. Charlie wasn’t very tall, and he got it from her—his father towered above him, but, when standing, he and his mother looked at each other eye-to-eye. She could be plenty scary if she wanted to be (another trait he inherited), though she was less frequently inclined to do so than her husband. He looked most like her, he thought. Straight brown hair (hers was graying) and a sharp nose on a flat face.

When Charlie got in her car, a little two-door Porsche she bought in the summer of eighty-six, she smiled at him—asked him how was tennis and how are his friends, that sweet Danbury girl, and the Overstreet boy—? and she told him she missed him very much, and straightened his jacket.

“Your father’s away,” she said tersely, and Charlie forced a closed-mouth smile.

“It’s a shame,” he said, out of courtesy alone, and she kept her eyes on the road. “How long will he be gone?”

“He’ll be home in a week. Next Thursday, he thinks.” She dug around in the glovebox for a moment, retrieving her sunglasses. “What were you thinking, Charlie?”

He knew instantly what she was referring to. “It wasn’t just to cause a scene.”

“I *know* that. There’s a thousand ways you could get your attention. You can’t live without it.”

He knew she’d always been the same way. She wanted to be an actress, once. Instead, she married a banker and moved to Vermont.

“Ginny hated the heels,” he said, staring at the road. Both of his parents loved catching him in the car—a token thing they had in common—where he couldn’t escape. He always said he was prone to motion-sickness so he could look directly forward or out the window and hope the air conditioner kept his eyes dry. “They haven’t been enforcing the rule since.”

She was quiet, but Charlie didn’t look at her. He heard the telltale flick of a cigarette lighter and the turning of the window-crank, and a rush of cold wind from outside. Better than getting smoked out.

“You know your father isn’t happy.”

“I’m sure he isn’t.”

“Don’t take that tone with me. What’s the matter with you?”

Charlie swallowed his annoyance. “Nothing. Just—can’t wait to get home.”

Home, however, was about an hour away, now. Behind them. Or

however far away Knox lived.

There was a long exhale and the smell of smoke.

“Are you alright, Charlie?”

A sweet gesture, if it could be trusted.

“Just great, Mom.”

“Did you make any new friends? Did you like your new tennis coach?”

“Keating was fine. There was a new kid in tennis.”

“Really?”

“New to Welton, too. His brother went here.”

“Right.” She flicked her ashes out of the window. “Welton used to be different. You would’ve been expelled for something like that back when your father went—it was an all-boys school then. You should count yourself lucky.”

Charlie shook his head. “But where would I get the shoes?”

His five days of relative peace rushed past him.

He spent most of the time holed up in his room, reading for pleasure while he had the chance. He must’ve read *Pride and Prejudice* and *The Fellowship of the Ring* a million times before, but he read them again on Saturday.

He spent Sunday afternoon outdoors, restless after church. It was an oddly warm day for December and he thought, fondly, of late September days at the courts as he practiced in his garden.

When it snowed on Monday and Tuesday, he played chess alone, listening to music.

Wednesday was the worst of the five, and he couldn’t do a damn thing without thinking of his father coming home in less than twenty-four hours. The snow was melting, but it was too muddy to go for a walk.

The steady dripping of melting icicles from the eaves of the great house could drive him mad.

Ginny was partly right, he thought, when his father got home on Thursday morning at eleven and didn't even speak to him until dinner. He had a lofty hope that he'd leave him alone until he left again, which was hopefully sooner rather than later.

He didn't talk much at dinner. He asked Charlie what his mother already had, and then some—including a lecture about the shoes.

"I don't want to hear anything else about it," he'd said, and Charlie glowered.

That wasn't the end of his trouble, though, and he should've known.

"What are you going to do with the socks?" Knox had asked him back in November. "If Ginny won't take them back?"

He was referring to, of course, the baby blue, silk plaid socks that Ginny had given him to wear with the heels.

"I'll just keep them, I think," Charlie had replied. "Souvenir."

He'd just kept them in his room at Welton, and then shoved them in his suitcase when he went home.

By Friday, one of his aunts was in town, and he was out all day with his cousins.

"Christmas shopping," he'd explained to his mother on his way out. He didn't stick around to hear her response. He just got in the car.

On Christmas Eve, Charlie learned that any hiding place is a bad hiding place, given that your parents were just nosy enough and just *determined* enough to find a reason to scream at you.

"I'm sorry," his mother tried to say as she stood in his doorway. He'd just been reading—laying on his bed and *reading* —and he couldn't mask his confusion. "I tried to tell him that they probably aren't yours, but—"

" *What* are you talking about?"

He'd heard footsteps that obviously belonged to his father coming up the stairs after her. He was already on the defensive—it wasn't the first time she'd had to warn him about *his* irrational behavior, and—

“Let me talk to him.”

His throat felt swollen, throbbing with a kind of guilt that had no source. (He’d reflect, later, that the word for that was *shame*). His father was holding his beautiful silk socks in his wild hand.

“I didn’t realize I raised a *girl*,” he seethed, shoving Charlie’s mother out of sight and taking her place in the doorway. Charlie swore he felt him spit on him. “Unless you’ve got yourself a generous girlfriend?”

Charlie’s stomach churned. “They were for the—for the heels.”

“You—” He looked like he was about to burst a blood vessel. It reminded Charlie of Nolan—or was it the other way around? “Don’t *mention* what you did with those goddamn *heels*, Charles. And you can burn these.” He threw them at him with such force that Charlie suspected he wished they were made of something less soft—something that would hurt.

“You can throw them away. I don’t want them.” He hated the sound of his own voice. It was shaking, almost as much as he was, and his breath felt hot like the tears behind his eyes.

“ *Bullshit*. Why’d you keep them, then?”

“She didn’t want them back—”

“She didn’t want them—my god, you think I’m stupid, don’t you?” Charlie wondered where he’d developed such an immunity to empathy, because the terrified look on his face must not have been particularly comforting. “I’m not raising a queer. I didn’t raise a *queer*. And forget about tennis. Those *normal* young men don’t need you anywhere near them until you fix this.”

“I didn’t *do* anything—”

“I can’t look at you.”

He didn’t slam the door, which Charlie might’ve been glad of had he not hit the door of the hall closet on his retreat, rattling it on its hinges and making Charlie choke on a sob.

His mother reappeared in his door only for a moment as he bent to retrieve the socks, fearful of the consequences for leaving them there. She looked at him, and he looked at her, and for a moment he thought she might feel bad.

“Give me those,” she snapped, and the illusion was shattered.

He silently rose and held them out to her, holding his eyes even with hers, rage boiling just beneath the surface.

“They were mine,” he said, and he sounded sick. His voice cracked.

“They’re just socks, Charles,” she said, before quietly following his father downstairs.

It was a number he knew by heart. When exactly he’d memorized it, he couldn’t remember. He didn’t really know.

He just remembered that, at thirteen, he’d called Knox over and over again that first summer—and he called back. In seventh grade he’d made it his mission to befriend him, and he’d succeeded.

They used to talk for hours on end, usually on the landline, until Charlie’s father cut him off. Still, every rainy summer afternoon he was hooked to the wall by a twisting silicon cord, grinning at the sound of his friend’s laugh on the other end.

It wasn’t a rainy summer afternoon, and their landline was no longer a phone attached to the wall in the kitchen, but rather a little rotary device that sat, mostly unused, in the foyer. His father took work calls on his new cell phone and, frankly, nobody else really called.

What hurt the most was wondering if he even had the right to call Knox about something like this. He mulled it over in his mind, wondering when he’d called Knox for the last time, and lamenting that he probably didn’t want to hear from him, anyway.

“Call when you get home,” Knox used to say before they left for break —summer, Christmas, spring—it didn’t matter.

“And then again after dinner,” Charlie used to joke back.

The rotary dial stared at him like a great, ogre-ish eye, taunting him and encouraging his awful thoughts. “It’s late,” it seemed to say. “Like he’d want to talk to *you* at this hour.”

Almost out of spite, clad in his pajamas and feeling very alone in the

giant house now that everyone was asleep, Charlie angrily reached for the receiver, holding it up to his ear and turning the dial. Knox's family's landline. Neither of them had cell phones of their own, obviously—there's no way they'd be able to pay for it.

The sharp trill of the phone seemed to Charlie loud enough to wake everyone in the house, but there wasn't a sound from anywhere else in the house. It seemed to go on forever, and Charlie had begun to give up hope that Knox or either of his parents would pick up. It was quite late—nearly ten—and it was Christmas Eve, after all. Maybe they were out of town.

Charlie sat on the floor (the phone was on a small table set against the wall for setting your keys or rings or what-have-you; he sat next to that) and leaned his head against the wall, the receiver like a great weight in his hand. He held his breath almost as tightly until the ringing stopped.

"Knox? Knox Overstreet?"

"This is him."

Charlie closed his eyes. His whole being felt raw and hollowed-out from an evening of silent heaving and pouring hot tears.

"Hi, Knox. It's Charlie." Was his voice shaking? Did he sound well?

"Charlie!" The sound of Knox's smile crumpled him even further. "Hello, what—what are you doing? Why—how are you?"

He chewed on his lip. "I'm fine," he heard himself say, before adding, with notable effort, "it's been a—just a bad night; that's all."

Knox was quiet on the other end for a moment, before he said, sounding genuinely sympathetic, "What happened?"

"Remember the socks?"

He unraveled the whole tale to him, and Knox was mostly quiet the entire time, except for a few murmurs of acknowledgement and some expressions of surprise. The only thing Charlie left out, which admittedly lessened the levity of the situation in his description of it, was his father's suspicion that he was queer and his self-proclaimed determination to 'get it fixed.'

"I mean—I'm very sorry, Charlie," his friend said, his voice a comfort

as Charlie's began quivering. "You can always get new socks."

Charlie hit his head against the wall. "It's not about the socks," he said, and he was crying again. "It's about—nevermind. I can't tell you."

"You can't *tell me* ? You called me."

While he agreed that it was a fair statement, it annoyed him extensively.

"It's something… something bad about *me* ."

"What did he say?"

After a beat of silence Knox asked the question again, and despite his incredible discomfort and increasingly pink face, he answered. "He accused me of being—something he—"

"Yeah?"

"He said I was a queer. Or at least acting like it, I guess"

This time Knox was quiet.

"He said he didn't raise a *fag* son and that we 'had to get it fixed.'"

"That's not how it works—"

"Like he gives a shit about how it works, Knox," he whispered hotly into the receiver. "It's just—he—"

"Well," Knox started, slowly, "are you?"

"That's not the point."

"No, but it's part of it."

"And if I was?"

"I wouldn't care."

Charlie stared foggily at the floor. "You say that like it's easy, Knox."

"Maybe it is. Maybe for us."

"I think he might be half-right," headmitted, tiredly rubbing his face with his free hand. "I'm really screwed up, aren't I?"

Knox chuckled. “I’m sorry. I can’t laugh at that.”

“You can. It’s hilarious.”

“So what’s going to happen?”

“I’m not sure,” Charlie said. “I do know I can’t do tennis next semester. Dad won’t let me.”

“Really? Geez, Todd won’t be happy.”

“ *I’m* not happy,” he pointed out. “What am I going to do?”

“Enjoy the last semester of your senior year, maybe,” he suggested. “Take a break.”

That was a thought.

“Maybe I will. Just to spite him, you know?”

“If that’s what it takes.”

They were both quiet for a moment. “But what about you?” Charlie asked. “Why aren’t you celebrating?”

“My family’s Jewish, Charlie.”

“Oh.”

Knox was laughing, and Charlie covered his mouth with his hand to be quiet.

“Well,” he said, eventually. “Get some sleep. Call me when you can, or else I’ll see you in a few weeks, okay?”

Charlie nodded, remembered Knox couldn’t see him, and made an affirming noise. “You too. Please. And—” He wasn’t even sure the question needed to be asked, but he wouldn’t be able to rest until he did. “And you won’t tell anyone?”

“No,” Knox said, evenly, through the phone. “No. I wouldn’t do that to you.”

He hugged his knees to his chest. “‘Bye, Knox.”

“Goodbye, Charlie. Go to bed.”

Chapter 5: valentine's day, 1989

Chapter Summary

> january and february, 1989

Chapter Notes

> next friday is the last time i update this as a high school student
> how did i get here

Welton re-opened in the second week of January, while the year was still young; the first month of the year when nobody ever writes the date correctly and there's that baseless feeling that now more than ever is the time to change your life. Charlie wasn't immune to the pressure to make some great resolution, and through some subconscious means he resolved that he wasn't going to let Knox Overstreet's sweet brown eyes ruin his life.

If he'd wanted a chance to dwell on the fact that *this* was just something he thought about now, he didn't get it: on the first day back, Knox found him in every hiding place possible, chasing him with words of empathy and concern.

"Are you sure nothing else happened?" he'd asked him, and Charlie didn't look at him. "Charlie, I'm not going to tell anybody—"

" *Shh,"* Charlie replied, harshly. "Not so loud."

If he felt bad for being so dismissive, he didn't show it, *least* of all to Ginny, who was on him about it relentlessly.

"He looks thinner," she remarked, one day. "Does he look thinner to you?"

Charlie shook his head.

"You're always looking at him."

"Then you should believe me. He's fine. If you want to get me talking about him, just say so."

"Maybe I do. You can't just leave me at 'I like his face' and that's that."

“That’s all there is to it.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“That’s too bad, then.”

As cruel, spiteful fate would have it, he had more classes with Knox that semester. Aside from gym, he now shared the first and last classes of the day with him: physics and some writing elective that Charlie had carelessly chosen over a year ago. Avoiding him was, admittedly, exhausting (Knox selfishly commanded his attention when he spoke and kicked the breath from his lungs every time he smiled but, Christ, did he have to do it so nicely?), so he didn’t protest as much as he probably should have.

Knox practically escorted him to his second class every day that first week, and if Charlie wasn’t so annoyed with himself, he might have had the sense to think it sweet.

When they were younger, Knox played soccer—he lost interest by sixteen and dropped it, and his parents just let him, without a hint of malice (as a concept, this was entirely foreign to Charlie). On the warmer days during that January, though, he had begun a habit of procuring a soccer ball from *somewhere* —Charlie never actually asked where—and going down to the pitch with anyone who’d accompany him. Usually, with all the new free time he had, that was Charlie, but Neil, Pitts, and Ginny often came long.

It was difficult to play a proper game with such a small group (and that was when all five of them were there) but they had enough fun running around in the mild forty- or fifty-degree weather of a Vermont January. It wasn’t a hobby that particularly aided Charlie's unofficial New Years’ resolution, but it was fun, and gave him an excuse to be near Knox, flushed and out of breath from ‘running’ and ‘the cold.’

Auditions for the spring show would be in the last week of January, and Ginny and Neil would become *busy* again and their little team would whittle down from five to three, and then, of course, Pitts had always cared more for academics than athletics. Charlie had that uncanny feeling he’d been feeling more and more often that year that this *was* what everyone was talking about, what they meant when they said that those late teenage years were some of the worst and the best in a human life: thoroughly confusing, exhilarating, and novel. He found many, many fantastic snapshots like these whenever he sifted through that box of polaroids and other mementos in a dusty

corner of his mind, with “Class of ‘89” scribbled on it in messy permanent marker as if the writer was in a hurry to capture it, to put it into words.

If it was a real box, with real *things* inside, there would be a humiliatingly great amount of pictures of Knox, stunning candids taken in perfect light that reality could never really live up to. The socks would be in there, too.

Time waits for no one—least of all for some kid jealous of his best friend’s girlfriend—and it flew past him, days melting into each other, gray skies turning blue as the weeks passed.

“Any big plans, Charlie?” Ginny asked him out of the blue, sometime in late January.

“For?”

“Valentine’s Day.”

It was nearly impossible to keep up with just how fast the semester was moving, and even more difficult to articulate in words. Naturally, he looked up at her, startled.

“I forgot it existed,” he admitted. “What are *you* doing?”

“I’ve got no plans,” she said. “And I *know* you don’t. You know what that means.”

“Do I?”

They were walking between classes, making their way across the campus from the dormitories to the physics lab. Science first thing in the morning could fry your brain, but talking about Knox was worse.

“Don’t play hard-to-get. I’m taking you out.”

“ *Where* ?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Let’s sneak out and get lunch.”

“Sneak—Ginny.”

“You said it yourself, Charlie. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“When on earth did I say that?”

She made no response, and he barked an incredulous laugh.

“Fine,” he told her. He conjured up a calendar in his mind. “The fourteenth is a Tuesday.”

“The Sunday before, then.”

“I feel like I’m supposed to ask you out first. Gin, wanna be my girlfriend?”

She snorted. “I couldn’t think about you *that way* in a million years. You know that.” She looked at him sideways. “Sorry. I’d rather die.”

If he didn’t know her as well as he did, he’d have been almost offended, but Charlie knew that it wasn’t personal. It was the inevitable consequence of him being, well, a man. “My *heart.* ”

“You’ll get over me, it’s okay. And anyway, you’d always be thinking about *him* .”

“You’re one to talk,” Charlie returned tartly. In their many conversations since the beginning of the semester, he’d managed to learn that Ginny was becoming perhaps as overly fond of her roommate as Charlie was of his own boy. (Not that he understood it. Chris annoyed him—he couldn’t be completely sure *why*; nevertheless, she did—but Ginny was infatuated, that was clear enough.)

“Maybe. Hey, let’s make them jealous of *us* ,” she suggested. “You know, make a whole thing out of it. Prom king and prom queen.”

“American royalty.”

She grinned. “You’d make a good boyfriend, Charlie. Shame you’re not my type.”

All this isn’t to say that Knox wasn’t still quite fixed in Charlie’s day-to-day life, leading up to and following *Valentine’s Day* (the words left a coppery and childishly jealous taste in his mouth, and at the same time had lost all fundamental meaning—Charlie was busy, anyway, writing college essays and trying, for once, to attempt some consistent scholarship. Cramming multi-colored notes into composition books; keeping a planner. If it helped at all, he wouldn’t have been able to

say, as any stress and confusion it might have diminished was once again amplified by his more *personal* anxieties). Through this, Knox remained present: today, they were in their shared English prose composition class, and he was attempting to convince Charlie to run off with him and Chris for spring break.

"My parents have a timeshare by Lake Champlain. On the Vermont side," he explained. "They never use it, and my parents thought… listen, you can bring Ginny, or…someone else. Two people, even. The five of us could fit in my dad's car."

Charlie, bewildered, was scrambling to decipher the significance of what he was saying. "You want to steal your dad's car for spring break?"

Knox stared blankly at him for a moment, before saying, with a laugh, "I'm not stealing it. He's letting me borrow it."

"He's letting you drive off God-knows-where with your girlfriend? For a week?"

"Not *just* my girlfriend," he said, looking rather sheepish. "And I don't want you to feel like a 'third-wheel' or anything, so…"

"I'll talk to Ginny," Charlie conceded. "Maybe Todd…Knox, where did you say this was?"

He had that smile again, the one he wore that made him look like he didn't have a care in the world. On anybody else, it might have agitated him; on Knox it was refreshing.

"My parents rent a lakehouse in Charlotte," he explained. "It's not the most exciting place in the world, but it's on the water."

"Sounds *great* , Knox."

"I'm glad you wanna go, really," he said, then added, after a moment, "I would've asked you anyway, you know. Even if…"

Charlie offered him a non-committal hum of acknowledgement.

"So, do you think you'll be able to go?" He knew what he meant immediately: *will your parents let you?*

"I'd like to see anyone stop me," he said, with a derisory smile. "With any luck, they won't even know I'm gone. They never take me home

during spring break."

He felt Knox's eyes on him, disconcertingly intense yet reassuringly forbearing as Charlie made a show of intensely jotting down notes and ideas for the narrative assignment. The lead of his pencil broke against his paper, and he was forced to abandon the ruse. Knox, being particularly tuned in to what made him tick, quietly offered him his own. Charlie cleared his throat.

"So, any plans for Valentine's Day?"

Regardless of that conversation, Charlie was still surprised to be accosted by Knox on his way out of his dorm room at eleven in the morning on a Sunday on his way to meet Ginny. Knox looked like he'd gotten dressed in a hurry, and had met up with neither comb nor razor. "Can I help you?"

"Are you busy?"

"I *think* I have a date," he said, brusquely, and ignored Knox's confusion as he pushed past him. "Don't you?"

"Why would I—" He stopped himself. "Wait, with who?"

Charlie realized there was no brushing him off. "Gin's taking me to lunch."

"Since when did you two date?"

"We don't."

"Oh," Knox said, quietly, before asking if he could join them. Charlie blinked at him. "Sorry," he amended, "I just—uh, well—"

"Why don't you go find Chris?" Charlie suggested, and took hold of the railing, turning arrestingly on his heel as they reached the stairwell. He threw his jacket around his shoulders, shrugging his arms through the sleeves. "Early Valentine's date."

"She's—"

"Yeah?"

“She’s with some friends of hers, and I don’t want to bother her.”

“So you’re bothering me instead?”

Knox seemed to think about that for a moment, falling silent behind him, except for his heavy footsteps. “Yes. That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

At that point, Charlie couldn’t have guessed what the problem was—Knox wouldn’t let him in on that secret yet—but he was, for a number of reasons, inclined to say yes. “Come on,” he said at last. “For fuck’s sake, though, please fix your hair.”

Ginny was waiting for him where she said she would be—pacing conspicuously outside one of the girls’ dorm halls—and Charlie glanced around discreetly. It was *windy* , and almost offensively sunny considering how cold it had gotten, and unless Charlie was mistaken, blind, or both, Ginny’s freckles had already begun to take on their typical springtime prominence. Knox’s light brown hair, whipping wildly over his forehead. could almost look blonde in unnatural light like that.

“Well,” she said, and Charlie could tell she thought herself *very* funny, “look what the cat dragged in. Or, should I say—”

“Ginny,” he said, tapping his foot. “Knox wants to go, too, do you mind?”

“If he’s buying for himself.” She laughed. “Oh, and Charlie, you’re paying for *me* , right?”

“You asked *me* out,” Charlie tried to grab her hand, but she swatted him away. “Rude.”

“I’m kidding. I’ll pay for your food, dear. My one *true* love.”

Knox looked between them, and Charlie shrugged. “You won’t even hold my hand.”

“Hold *Knox’s* hand,” she returned, and Knox, to Charlie’s surprise, laughed. “What? It’s the same thing. You and I are friends. You and Knox are friends.”

“It’s not the same and you *know* that,” Charlie said. “Knox, do you have—?”

“I’ve got money,” he said flatly, his hands in his pockets.

“ *I’ll* hold his hand then. Knox, c’mere.” Ginny stomped over and took Knox’s hand in hers, pulling it out of his pocket, and when he didn’t protest, she looked at Charlie triumphantly. “See? He doesn’t bite.”

They managed to leave without gathering any unnecessary attention (it was a Sunday morning; half the faculty and student body were sleeping in or at least staying indoors) and Ginny led the two of them to some local sandwich shop she frequented near the theater. Knox looked more nervous than usual—his typical shyness, Charlie suspected—and he, trying to be encouraging, hovered near him; their shoulders were touching.

Ginny led them to a small table in the corner, settling in the only seat by the window and leaving Knox and Charlie to sit next to each other on the other side.

(Charlie certainly wasn’t complaining.)

They must’ve made quite a sight—three obviously high school-aged students at the nearest restaurant to Welton campus on a Sunday—but nobody said a word. They had a knack for blending in. After they’d ordered and gotten their drinks, Charlie (weeks after the fact) remembered to mention the trip.

“Oh, Gin,” he said, suddenly. “It’s a good thing Knox is here, actually.” He jabbed Knox’s arm with his elbow. “Sorry. Tell her about the timeshare thing.”

“Right,” he said, and he cleared his throat before telling her what he’d already told Charlie, about the lake and the proposed spring break excursion.

Her face broke into a smile. “You’re *kidding* ,” she said. “I mean, if *pretty boy* goes, I’ll go. Someone needs to supervise him.” She reached across the table and held Charlie’s hand, a faux display of romantic affection.

Knox nodded. “Good. Yeah, it’ll be fun.”

“So, you wanna go?”

“I’ll ask my parents,” she said and, having now lost interest in Charlie, was mindlessly swirling the ice around in her drink. “Will it be warm enough to swim, do you think?”

“Probably,” he said, and shrugged. “I don’t know. During the afternoon, maybe.And, you know, it’s a big house. There’s a queen-sized bed in one of the rooms, a set of bunk beds, and a pull-out couch. That’s room for six people.”

“If anyone’s willing to share a bed with *you* ,” Charlie said with a laugh. Ginny raised an eyebrow. “We went camping, once, when we were younger,” he explained. “His dad took us. I had to share a full with him and he kept waking up sideways.”

“It wasn’t *that* bad.”

“You were using my legs as a pillow.”

Ginny looked between them, and he saw her smirk in the corner of his eye—Charlie ignored her. Knox was more engaging.

“It wouldn’t be right for Knox and his girlfriend to share a bed anyway.”

“He’s a gentleman.”

“Right,” she said. “You two would take either the queen or the pullout and Chris and I will share whatever one you don’t take. Is anyone else going?”

Knox glanced sideways at Charlie. “I thought about asking Todd.”

“ *Oh* ,” she said. “He’s a sweetheart. But what about Neil?”

Charlie shook his head. “You know as well as I do that he’ll want to stay here and work on his *craft* .”

“But will Todd go if he doesn’t?”

“He likes me,” he said, defensively. “I’m not going to pressure him, though. Maybe if we… wait, when does spring break even start?”

“The seventeenth of March is our last day. That Friday,” Knox explained. “Break’s the week of the twentieth. Charlie, that’s the week of your birthday, isn’t it?”

He nodded. It would fall in the middle of the break, on a Wednesday (if his math was right), and Charlie wondered, foggily, if he’d feel any less trapped at eighteen.

Around twelve-fifteen Knox made some excuse about having to leave early—something about a project—and it was obviously a lie, but Charlie didn't push it. Ginny and Charlie resolved to walk around for a while longer, neither of them keen to go back to school. Ginny let him hold her hand.

"Knox's birthday's in a few weeks, too," Charlie said thoughtfully as they mingled through the foot traffic. "Less than a month before mine"

"I didn't realize they were so close," she said, incredulously.

"I should buy him something." She rolled her eyes, but let him drag her into some kind of dime store on the corner.

Inside, there were all sorts of strange trinkets and small toys—Ginny spent a particularly long time examining a 'pet rock' rip-off—and Charlie, running low on impulse control, bought himself a small ceramic seal.

" *Look* at him," he said, as Ginny scoffed exasperatedly. "I'm going to name him Hugo."

"And I'm going to break your wrist."

Charlie spent about five minutes looking at magazines and books before deciding that that was a lost cause, and Ginny sidled up beside him, her chin on his shoulder. "You should get him something he can use pretty often," she whispered in his ear. "That way he *has* to think about you."

"You're evil."

"I love you, too.'

That suggestion led him to a modest rack of jackets by the door—a humble selection—and he wrinkled his nose. "I should just get him some new tapes and call it."

"Wait," Ginny said quickly, spinning around and darting over to a selection of jewelry.

" *That's* not going to happen," he said sharply, following her closely.

“Maybe a ring? Boys wear rings. Signet rings. Promise rings.” She was talking to herself, her voice barely above a murmur. “Oh, my *god* , Charlie, look at this.”

She procured a small, silver ring with a lovely image of a flower depicted in relief on the round facet. “It’s so *pretty* .”

Charlie rolled his eyes. “It’s great.”

“You took that British literature class with me sophomore year, right?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Of course she’d decide to ramble at a desperate time like this.

“Well, remember Wilde?”

“Of course I remember Wilde.”

“You liked *In the Forest* .”

“Yes, what’s the point?”

“Do you remember that book— *The Green Carnation* ? I forget the name of the author. Richard or Robert-something.”

“ *Oh* .”

“It couldn’t be more fitting. It’s a *secret message* .”

“It’s a death sentence.”

She shook her head. “You give him too much credit. Listen—if he does work so hard to figure out the symbolism of the flower on a five-dollar ring you buy him, that means he wants to find something.”

Charlie took the ring carefully in his right hand. The band was wide, and the ring had a pleasant weight on his palm. It was a perfectly masculine design, and he felt suddenly compelled to agree with her, even if there was a part of him that didn’t believe Knox would ever wear it.

“Fine,” he said, eventually. “Are you ready to go, then?”

“I need to grab something.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re actually buying that stupid pet rock.”

She made a poor effort to stifle a revealing smile, and he laughed.

Chapter 6: charlotte

Chapter Summary

march, 1989, part one

Fitting everybody's things into the back of the Mercedes was a challenge fit for a Tetris champion. None of them were particularly heavy travelers, either: all of them had only one bag each, without much actual *stuff* to speak of anyway, not leaving from school. Knox was the exception, having gone home with his father on Friday and returning for the rest of them that following Sunday, and even he packed light. He'd returned to Welton wearing a dark green sweater with his initials embroidered on the bottom hem with golden thread (new, Charlie could tell) and in jeans that fit rather flatteringly, and with the self-possessed charisma of a touchstone American bachelor.

"Put the suitcases on the *bottom* ," Ginny argued as Charlie tried to stuff Chris's little pink suitcase in the trunk on top of her black sports bag. She was holding Charlie's navy one at her side. Her hair was tied up, and she had a baby blue bandana wrapped around her head. "Jesus, Charlie, what did you put in here?"

"Don't be dramatic. It's just clothes."

" *It's just clothes,* " she mocked. Charlie stuck his tongue out at her as he tugged on the pink suitcase.

"...Is the whole trip going to be like this?" came Todd's voice, meek, from over Charlie's shoulder. "I can just keep my bag on my lap—"

"No," Knox said, suddenly. "There's not enough room in the backseat. Charlie, let me help you." He handed him Ginny's sports bag, and he took it with ease.

"Chris, do you need anything out of this?" Charlie asked. "Before I bury it alive, anyway."

"I have everything I need," she said, smiling, and shrugged one shoulder, emphasizing the tote bag hanging from it. "Who's driving first?"

"I drove here," Knox said. "I don't mind driving first, but—I really don't want to."

Charlie laughed. “Give me the keys.”

Knox sat in the passenger seat—naturally, it *was* his dad’s car—and Chris, Ginny, and Todd piled into the back, with Ginny in the middle so she could distract the driver. Charlie started the car.

“Let’s get some music,” she said, stretching languidly, much to Todd’s dismay. “Knox, please tell me that the radio works in this thing.”

“Why wouldn’t it? It’s *brand* new.”

Charlie watched as Knox fiddled with the dial, tuning into a local FM rock station. There was a certain silver ring on his hand; Charlie had been acutely aware of the fact all morning. “You don’t think—”

“Hmm?”

“You don’t think we’ll need gas, do you?” The sun glinted off of the metal.

Knox leaned over him to check the odometer. The hum of the engine had nothing on Charlie’s heartbeat. “Probably,” he admitted. “We’ll stop somewhere. Manchester’s on the way; that’ll be about when we’ll need it.”

“How far away is Manchester?” Ginny complained. “I want a drink already. A root beer sounds *amazing.* ”

“We can drive through someplace,” Chris suggested. In the rearview, Charlie could see her put a hand on Ginny’s knee.

He cleared his throat dramatically. “ *Who’s* the one driving? I *hate* drive-thrus.”

“Whose *car* is this, Charlie?”

Todd coughed behind him as Charlie put the car in gear. A light drizzle had begun, and he flicked on the headlights. Steven Morrissey’s baritone yearning floated from the speakers. ‘ *He knows so much about these things…’*

They all fell into an easy banter—all except Todd, who was napping against the window. Ginny and Chris were playing some sort of *I-Spy* game together, though they weren’t having much luck, with the landscape showing nothing but hills and trees and the odd billboard for miles. All their efforts to include Knox in their game were useless.

He was humming to himself, reading some sort of map that was resting on his knee.

'Why pamper life's complexity' indeed.

No *five* people, no matter how close, could possibly enjoy being in such close quarters for so long. They were fifteen minutes out of Manchester and Chris was decidedly the most irritable. Ginny and Todd were both asleep, Charlie was focused on the road and the directions Knox was feeding him. He was deflecting Chris's every attempt at conversation.

"What's Charlotte like?" she asked. Knox shrugged.

"Just your average lake town," he said. "Charlie, turn left up here."

"Are you sure you know where we're going?"

"I do. There's a gas station about five miles from here…"

"Are there any shops—?"

"…You're gonna make another left. You should see some sort of tire shop first, I think."

" *Knox* ."

He looked over his shoulder and Charlie side-eyed him uneasily. He didn't dare check his rearview for fear of making eye contact with a very irritated Chris Noel.

"What?"

"I asked you a question." It was perhaps, in fact, the fifth ignored question of the day.

"I heard you. I'm sorry. I'm *trying* to make sure we don't run out of gas in the middle of nowhere."

"This whole state is in the middle of nowhere." Ginny had woken up, apparently, and she stretched her arms forward over the glovebox and yawned. "What are we talking about? Where are we?"

Chris groaned. “I don’t know. I don’t think Knox does, either.”

Charlie made an effort not to roll his eyes, instead glancing over at the map. During the few seconds he afforded it before looking back at the road, he saw that Knox had been marking out a route in pen. “It looks alright to *me* .”

“We’re in Manchester,” Knox told Ginny. “Almost out, actually. It’s a little out of the way but I wanted to make sure we could refill the tank.”

As Charlie drove, buildings became less sparse and steadily his faith in Knox’s navigation abilities was bolstered. A Sunoco station appeared on their left and Charlie pulled in.

“I’ll go in,” he volunteered. He looked at Knox. “ *You* pump. It’s your car.”

“Can I go in with you?” Todd asked.

“Well, well, good morning, sleeping beauty,” Chris said, digging through her bag. “I’m getting some fresh air, too, anyway. Charlie, will you be a dear and get me a coke and a pudding pie? Thanks.” She tried to hand him two dollars, but he waved her off; why, he had no idea.

“It’s okay. I’ll get it for you.” She thanked him. Charlie felt another uncanny pang in his chest.“Knox, do you want something?”

“You don’t need to buy me anything,” he said, rubbing his cheek self-consciously.

“I *want* to.”

He bit his lip and looked for a moment like he was deep in thought, then asked for a coke.

Chris was looking at him crossly. Charlie was anxious to get inside—Knox handed him a ten dollar bill. Todd followed closely behind him.

The interior was largely underwhelming. Between the two of them, they managed to carry what *everyone* wanted—three cokes, a root beer, a can of iced tea for Todd, a pudding pie, and two bags of chocolate-covered peanuts.

“Ten of this’s on pump five,” Charlie said to the attendant who just

blinked and wrote something down on a card. He gave him a twenty.

When they emerged from the store, Ginny's eyes were on them almost immediately. She looked like a cornered opossum who wanted nothing more than to play dead. Almost immediately Charlie understood why: Knox and Chris were talking—again—rather waspishly, spitting back and forth.

"I don't *care* if it's a bad time for you," he was saying biliously.

"You've barely talked to me all morning."

"I was reading the *map* ."

"It's not just this morning, either," Chris said, her hands on her hips. She was wearing a lavender skirt that fell just below her knees, and it was thrashing in the wind. "It's been weeks."

"I've been planning the trip. What's your problem with me, really?"

Charlie and Todd had stopped walking as if by some telepathic agreement, standing in the middle of the lot. Ginny was leaning flurriedly against the car. She pretended to be fixing her hair—it was useless, the wind nearly blew the bandana off of her head.

Chris looked like she might start crying, and Charlie, frankly, had no idea what he would do if she did. He'd never actually witnessed Knox and Chris having a fight—if they ever *did* —but it felt too familiar to him. Todd tugged on his arm. He didn't want anything, Charlie knew. He understood.

"It's like you don't know how to talk to me," she said, her eyes watery. "Not even that you don't *want* to, you just—you *just* —"

"You're right," Knox said, unexpectedly. Charlie caught Ginny's eye. "I don't."

He was flushed red, but otherwise, he was all around much more composed than *she* was: Charlie wondered how long he'd been thinking of doing this.

"I don't understand what I've been doing *wrong* —"

"You didn't do anything wrong," he said, with surprising gentleness. Charlie began to slowly approach the car, and he stood just behind Ginny, with Todd just behind *him* , like dominoes. "Only I think we

should—uh— *see other people* .”

Ginny gaped.

“Fine,” she said, through tears, and got back in the car—rather awkwardly; the door wouldn’t open at first, Knox had to manually unlock it.

Ginny, after a long, unbearable pause, opened the door on the other side and climbed in, sitting, once again, in the middle. Charlie heard muffled sobs and speech. Knox was staring blankly at the pump, and Todd, sympathetic, replaced the nozzle.

“You can drive,” Charlie offered, when they were the only two still standing outside. “If you want.”

He took the keys.

“Jesus,” Charlie said, when he collapsed into the passenger’s seat. “It’s only ten in the morning.”

Todd was having a terrible time, and Charlie knew it. He wasn’t alone in the feeling— *that* was certain—but he pitied him especially. He didn’t sign up to be a fifth-wheel on the most dysfunctional vehicle ever. He just wanted to go to the *lake* .

They didn’t stop once until they made it to Charlotte proper, and they spoke little. Actually, the only words that were spoken were from Charlie and Knox. Charlie looked over Knox’s notes on the atlas—uncertain black lines, undoubtedly from a hurried hand. Tiny, messy handwriting that Charlie could somehow read without a problem.

It was even colder in Charlotte than it had been in Welton-town when they’d left, and it was just as overcast. It wasn’t raining, at least.

They stopped and ate at some little place Knox said he used to go to as a kid. The food was good—great, even, good enough that Charlie would one day go back—but the company had become unbearably uncommunicative.

“Todd,” Ginny said, too loudly, “would you—uh—pass the salt?”

Other than that spectacular display of human communication, conversation was kept to a minimum.

“Do you remember,” Knox said lowly, at some point, to Charlie from his seat beside him, “when we chased each other through the woods with pool noodles?”

The camping trip. Charlie remembered. He covered his smiling mouth with the back of his hand. “Because your dad said it was too cold to go in the water,” he recalled. “So—”

“So we ran around shirtless in the woods instead.”

They bowed their heads together, trying in vain to stifle their laughter. The others were glancing vexatiously at them, but Charlie, for one, didn’t care.

Things lightened up considerably by the time they made it to the house, both figuratively and literally: the sun had come out from behind the clouds, and Chris and Ginny were carrying on a conversation about *something* —Charlie didn’t know what.

The house itself was no small cottage. It was cape-cod, with a full front porch and white-washed clapboard siding. It was bright against the new growth of the forest, which itself was set back about twelve yards from the shore, all evergreens and red oaks and a thick floor of pine needles. There was a dock, recently painted, and the water, lapping tranquilly against the beach, was a shade darker than the sky.

The white Mercedes was an equally picturesque addition to the whole scene. Knox and Charlie went inside first; almost immediately Chris, Ginny, and Todd were distracted by a pair of wood ducks eyeing the company cautiously from the dock.

“It’s been years since I’ve been here,” Knox said once they were on the porch. He had Charlie’s sports bag slung over one shoulder and was pulling his own suitcase behind him. Charlie, on the other hand, had insisted on carrying Ginny’s bag and Todd’s backpack (“I have *two* arms”) and was tugging on Chris’s cumbrous little suitcase as well.

“Is it nice inside?”

“Probably covered in dust.”

He pushed open the door bodily after turning the lock. Charlie, unwilling to dwell, followed him inside quickly. All luggage was

promptly abandoned next to the door.

It was remarkably airy on the inside even with the curtains drawn shut. The walls were painted a very light green, almost white, and the furniture was wicker and sparse. Where there was wooden furniture it was pine—the dining room table (more accurately, a dining nook), the kitchen cabinets, a coffee table with some books stacked on it. The house was all one floor, and the front door opened into a closed kitchen, though all the main rooms were connected by cornered archways made out of some kind of dark wood. Charlie felt like he was in one of those magical places that expand impossibly on the inside, but it was still intimate. There was a plant on the counter—some kind of fern, maybe—and Charlie wondered how it wasn't dead. He said so out loud.

"Oh, someone maintains the place," Knox said. "I don't know who. Or how often. Maybe it's new."

He pulled back the curtains and cracked open the kitchen window, before gesturing for Charlie to follow.

Off of the main sitting room there was a hallway, perpendicular to the front of the house. There was only one door on the right, at the end.

"This one's ours," Knox told him, as he opened the door. He brought in their things. "Guess it's a good thing we planned on sharing a long time ago, huh?"

It didn't take mental acrobatics to understand what he meant: that it would be really, really terrible if the plan had been for Knox to share with Chris.

"Where did that come from?" Charlie asked him, with a slight tilt of his head. "I mean—from the outside, you and Chris…you really liked her."

Knox leaned against the doorframe. The room was really nice, all things considered: a queen-sized bed in the middle of the back wall, a big, open window at the front of the house, facing the lake. He shook his head.

"It's the weirdest thing, Charlie," he said. "I'm not sure I ever did."

Reluctant to press the issue, Charlie nodded and was silent.

"I'll go get the others. Show them around," Knox added, eventually.

“Oh, and there’s a bathroom across the hall.”

He disappeared, and Charlie peeked through the curtains. Todd was sitting, cross-legged, on the steps of the front porch, and it looked like Ginny was (unsuccessfully) showing Chris how to skip stones on the water. He must’ve watched about seven stones sink on impact, but Ginny was persistent. Knox appeared eventually, and he heard his voice, indistinct, through the glass, and they abandoned their lesson. Todd stood up, using a column for support.

He swallowed and, suddenly feeling oddly sentimental, let the curtain fall back into place as he turned from the window. He moved his bag to the foot of the bed and started, uncertainly, to unpack.

Charlie woke up the next morning alone.

Sleeping in the same bed as Knox hadn’t been as calamitous as it might have been. They’d both done it before, and were, by the standards of many, physically closer than most friends. Knox had also grown out of his erratic sleeping habits, which was a pleasant surprise for Charlie, who was glad not to be woken up by a foot prodding his tailbone. Knox had never been one to snore, either. He’d fallen asleep first the night before, exhausted from the emotional labor the trip had already required, and Charlie lay awake, watching the thin strip of light that came through the curtains move slowly around the room as the hours passed. It stood to reason Knox would be the first to wake.

Rubbing his eyes uncertainly, he forced himself from the comfort of a warm bed and put his feet on the shaggy blue rug on the floor. Certainly more welcoming than hardwood, or tile. He yawned.

Steadily he became aware of noises coming from down the hallway, in the kitchen; the sound of clattering pans and sizzling. He glanced around foggily for a clock, and the analog on the nightstand served its purpose, reading ten-fourteen. He threw a robe that he found in the bathroom on, over his pajamas, and made his way down the hall.

Ginny and Todd were sitting across from each other at the breakfast nook, and Knox was standing at the stovetop.

“Since when did we have food here?” Charlie asked, his voice groggy

from lack of use.

“I went to the store this morning.” Knox flipped a small pancake. “Ginny wanted pancakes.”

She yawned. “What a guy,” she said, standing up to stir the batter. “We were the first two up. I was beginning to think you would never get up.”

Charlie wrinkled his nose at her. “Where’s Chris?”

“Oh, she’s sleeping,” Ginny said. “I’ll wake her up when Knox is done. How many more do you think there are in here?”

“I’m almost done. Might as well go get her now.”

She shrugged, and appeared to consider it, before disappearing around the corner into the hall. Todd made some excuse about going to see if there were any ducks outside—Charlie wasn’t really listening—and he went out the door.

Charlie walked over to Knox’s side, craning his neck to look past him at the nearly empty bowl of batter and the stack of pancakes on a plate. “What else did you get?”

“Not a lot. Bagels. Pasta. Easy things to make like that. This place makes people lazy,” he said. Despite apparently having been up for several hours, his voice carried all the signs of sleep. It was lower than it usually was—that is, lower than *Charlie’s* —and it thrummed pleasantly in his ears. He hadn’t heard much talking before he came in; Knox probably hadn’t said much all morning. “Do you want one? Are you hungry? You can take a plate.”

Charlie smiled, repressing the now all-too-familiar urge to kiss him, and took a plate Knox had procured from one of the top cabinets.

Breakfast that morning went significantly better than both lunch and dinner of the day before, with any reservations replaced with excited chatter about potential activities.

“The temperature *shot* up,” Ginny said. “We might actually be able to swim today.”

“I brought cards,” Todd offered, looking at Charlie, who smiled reassuringly.

“There’s some biking paths around here,” Knox said nostalgically, staring out the window. “We could rent bicycles—maybe not today, necessarily—and see the country.”

“That sounds fun,” Chris replied, unexpectedly, and Charlie nodded.

Though he was without a car of his own, or substantial funds, he felt like he could go anywhere. The taste of independence filled Charlie’s mouth like honey, putting a light-hearted smile on his face that wasn’t unlike Knox’s typical grin. For most of that week, his parents were, for all he cared, the same sort of breezy, understanding kind that Knox’s were, very laissez-faire without being neglectful, and Charlie was different too. Maybe it was the weather, maybe it was the water, maybe it was the way Knox looked with his shirts unbuttoned to the navel with a sunburn high on his cheeks, or maybe it was just him, grateful to be away from his family, and away from Welton, to have ordinary teenage boy worries; not flinching at the drop of a hairpin.

Monday was spent floating and swimming aimlessly around, at least until dinner. Tuesday was a little cooler, so they spent less time in the water, breaking out Todd’s deck of cards and playing go-fish on the porch because it was all Chris knew how to play. Todd tried and failed to show them a few card tricks he said Neil had attempted to teach him; they lost the Jack of Clubs to the wind.

Tuesday evening found Todd and Charlie on the front porch steps, watching Chris and Ginny attempting to wade in the shallows, jumping with high-pitched squeals when the waves lapped above their ankles. Knox was inside, finding something to eat, and Todd said to him, with a kind of unusual openness, that he liked Neil. It had the air of having been rehearsed.

Charlie laughed, a weird little laugh that came out of his nose more than anything. “I know that,” he said. “I know. Jesus, yeah, I saw that coming.”

“What makes you say that?”

The sound of the old front door creaking open made Todd jump, but Charlie just shrugged. “It takes one to know one,” he said.

Todd’s eyes widened, but he was noticeably less surprised than Charlie might have expected him to be. “Since October, right?” *Shit, he was good.* Then again, Todd had always been observant.

Knox sat down carefully on Charlie’s other side with an almost empty

glass in his hand. He was magnetically close and his skin radiated sunshine. “Want a drink?”

Charlie raised an eyebrow at what remained of the bubbly liquid in the cup.

“It’s nothing like that,” he assured him. “Though I really doubt you’d actually say no, Wanda.”

A nickname from junior high—when Charlie still had no idea how to externalize the ineffable dysphoria with the two roles he invented for himself to play, one at home and one at school and with his general dissatisfaction about it all—that Charlie had chosen completely at random from a book he’d read in the sixth grade, laboring through his short attention span. Once, likely around that impressionable age of eleven, Charlie had decided that he’d do anything at all to become *some* kind of phenomenal, garnering enough attention to distract from that profound malaise that plagued him. Sometime between that point and then, the light and particular attention of a few close friends became enough for him.

“You’re not wrong,” he said, after a hazy sort of pause, drunk on nothing but the sun. Charlie’s naked shoulder pressed flagrantly against Knox’s bare arm as he took the glass from him. He downed the rest in one swallow, aware, vaguely, of Knox staring at his exposed, bobbing throat. *Ginger ale,* he thought distantly, as the taste became familiar on his tongue and the bubbles popped in his throat. The sunlight refracted idyllically on the water, dazzling to his eyes, and Chris and Ginny were still splashing around in the shallows, kicking water at each other in their swimsuits. All of them were beautiful to him, then. Todd’s sky eyes were brilliant as he watched, fascinated, as a flock of geese flew above them in a giant *V* . Knox was too warm next to him, *hot* , but he didn’t move away.

Anything could happen at all in a place like that. Even something like this.

Chapter 7: swimming, sunscreen, and springsteen

Chapter Summary

march, 1989, part two

Chapter Notes

I'm officially a high school graduate. Crazy that I only have one or two more chapters of this to write, two or three more to publish. It's been fun!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun set, the crickets sang. Charlie and Knox faded into the pine-needle background, completely absorbed in conversation. He never could remember another time he felt so relaxed and young.

The night carried on.

Knox procured some kind of radio from the attic and set it on the porch; Ginny brought him another glass of ginger ale. Charlie complained of the cold, and Todd was poking a pile of sticks on the beach, asking aloud if they should have a fire.

“Is that even legal?”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s have a fire,” Knox cut in. “I’ll help you, Todd.”

Charlie watched dazedly as the two of them got a spark, kindling it into a proper flame. Ginny joined him on the porch. She was saying something about the song—he was only half-listening—her voice raised against the music.

“How do you feel?” It was loud to his ear.

“ *Profound* ,” he said, and she laughed.

Knox tended the flames; Todd attempted to coax a few ducks into swimming towards him. Chris was changing the radio station, interrupting some late night radio show and digging through static until some old Eagles song became distinct.

“Look at me,” he heard Ginny say; in his dissociative fugue he ignored her until she grabbed him by the chin, and she pulled him towards her face. He didn’t even flinch when she kissed him, lifting his chin and pushing her hair back behind her cheekbones. *Crazy,* Charlie thought, *completely batty.*

“Are you sure you’ve only had soda?” he murmured.

She laughed, short and sardonic. “I just want her to *look* at me.”

Chris was looking at them, her face vacant, though perhaps it was only that it was dark.

The fire was pleasantly warm, not too hot, even when the five of them had all gathered around it. Knox had some damp sand sticking to his legs up to his knees and his hair was still wet. He smelled like sunbaked rocks and the cucumber hand soap from the kitchen; he’d just spent nearly three minutes telling him a story about the house, making wild hand gestures, when he said, suddenly, “You’ve got something under your eye.”

“I have a—?”

He shook his head before taking an eyelash from his cheek, with fantastic care. His hand was steady. “Guess you get to make a wish, right? That’s how it works.”

Charlie bit his lower lip before blowing gently on Knox’s outstretched palm, and the lash disappeared from what was known.

“What did you wish for?” That was Chris, leaning forward on her knees and tilting her head.

“He can’t say, that’s the rule,” Knox said, stretching his arms over his head. “With that in mind, what did you wish for, Charlie?”

He laughed. “World peace.”

“ *Bull* shit.”

The space under Knox’s outstretched arm and his firm torso was a comfortable one, and though it was not the first time Knox had held him, it was the first time it really felt like it could be called that; he could have fallen asleep there. Ginny and Chris were sitting beside each other, speaking intimately back and forth, and Todd, from beside him, was glancing between the two pairs. Charlie felt a little sorry for

him at the time, though he didn't feel Neil's absence as sorely as Todd must have.

He might have slept a little, because at some point he opened his eyes and Chris and Ginny had vanished, and Todd was kicking sand over the dying embers with his heels. His cheek pressed uncomfortably into Knox's shoulder, and he was sure there was an agitated spot on the side of his face, but he didn't want to move. The front of his body was hot and the breeze, coming up over the water, chilled the back of his neck.

"I'm going to bed," Todd said uncertainly. "It's nearly twelve."

"That's early," Knox said, his voice very near to his ears. "Turn down the radio on your way in, at least."

Charlie felt that he *should* move, but not one part of him wanted to. Knox made the decision for him, detaching himself carefully from his side and staring pensively at the ashen ground. The hand around his shoulder had branded him.

They sat silently near each other for a while, something by *Berlin* playing quietly on the radio.

"You and Ginny..?" Knox said eventually, with some effort.

Charlie stared at him as the question registered. "Oh, no," he said. "No."

"Oh."

"Yeah."

"Do you want a drink?"

"Yeah. Some water?"

"Sure."

Knox left him, and Charlie stood, stretching his legs. With the fire out it was once again a little cold and he hugged his arms against his chest, his skin feeling as exposed as his heart.

He met Knox on the porch, on his way in and Knox's way out, and gratefully accepted the glass of water he was offered, sitting down on one of the wicker chairs as he drank it. Knox leaned coolly against the railing, though not, initially, without perceptible effort to balance. He

was lovely, clumsy and lovely; he was fantastically real, and Charlie felt that he couldn't know him any better if he *was* him.

"What time did Todd say it was?" he asked eventually.

Knox started, looking at him curiously. "I don't know," he said. "Why?"

"Really, what time is it? I want to know."

With a raised eyebrow, Knox leaned inside the front door, staring at the clock in the kitchen. "It's half-past midnight," he said, with considerable surprise. "Geez, when did it get to be so late?"

Charlie stared at his fingers, wrapped loosely around the glass.

"Why do you ask?"

He looked up at him. "Well, it's my birthday."

Looking back, Charlie was never quite sure how he survived the following twenty-four hours. They spoke about nothing at all for a few more minutes after that point, for how long exactly he was unsure; at any rate, it was no longer than an hour. Then, Charlie followed Knox to their shared room and fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

The daytime was less trivial.

"Oh, Charlie," Ginny said, first thing in the morning. "Happy birthday, beautiful."

She kissed him on the cheek.

As a birthday—his eighteenth, no less—it stuck out not as particularly eventful, but as one of the most pleasant to date; he was for the most part left alone.

"Let's go to town again," Chris suggested, around eleven, and there was unanimous agreement. "Get some lunch."

Although charming, Charlotte was an unimpressive town in size, so Knox drove again to that same local eatery. They walked around town

after, for half an hour at least, until Todd started sneezing and complaining of itchy eyes; Charlie insisted they go back.

“I didn’t know it was your birthday, Charlie. I would’ve gotten you something,” Todd said, sniffling.

Charlie waved him off. “Don’t let the pollen kill you; I’ll be happy.”

They got home and Ginny had the brilliant idea of making floats with the sodas and ice cream they’d gotten while out; she spilled a whole glass on the kitchen floor, so Charlie put a second straw in his.

While looking for a mop Knox found some board games shelved at the top of the broom closet, so they spent the afternoon playing Monopoly and unlocking everybody’s secret capitalist alter-egos.

“You *bastard* ,” Chris hissed at Ginny. She’d gone bankrupt first. “You’re despicable.”

“You should’ve tried not being *poor* .”

The whole thing stressed Todd out more than it was worth, so they decided to restart and play as teams. The exception was Knox, who played alone as the banker. They didn’t finish one game.

“Is there a chessboard up there?”

“Just checkers,” Knox said. “Why?”

“I didn’t know you played chess, Charlie,” Ginny said. “Are you self-taught?”

Charlie shook his head. “My dad taught me ages ago. I’ve been playing with Cameron, if you can believe that.”

Shock sprang onto Knox and Ginny’s faces. Todd and Chris didn’t know the history.

“I thought you two didn’t get along,” Chris said slowly, but amiably.

“I don’t know. I guess we were both just being lonely jerks. He’s not so bad.” As Charlie said it, he realized it was true; his opinion had changed incredibly fast over the course of one year. Maybe they were just growing up; maybe it was circumstantial. “He’s not that bad at all, no.”

“That’s good, then,” Knox noted. “I knew he’d come around

eventually. It's difficult not to like you, Charlie."

He laughed to cover up a particularly telling smile, shy and trembling on his lips.

It rained a while, and Knox turned on the television, trying to get some kind of weather report. According to the weatherman, temperatures showed no signs of dropping.

"I could've told you that," Ginny complained. "And it's been so humid, too."

"The rain will change that," Knox pointed out. "What's wrong, I thought we wanted it to be hot?"

"I do," Charlie said. "Did he say when it's gonna stop raining?"

Knox shushed him. The weatherman told them to expect infrequent, light showers until early evening.

"It's almost over, then," Chris said, with a one-shouldered shrug. "If you all don't mind, I'm going to take a nap."

Nobody did, and everything was so dreary anyway that none of them wanted to do much of anything. Ginny said she was going to have a shower, and that she'd probably take a nap after, too, and Charlie, suddenly overwhelmed with sleepiness, laid sideways on the couch.

Knox rolled his eyes. "You have a bed you can sleep in; you know that, right?"

"I'm not going to sleep," he replied, throwing an arm over his face. "Resting my eyes."

He could hear the smile in Knox's voice. " *Okay* , Charlie. Rest your eyes."

When he woke up, it had stopped raining, and the setting sun was streaming in through the front bay window. There was a blanket thrown over him that hadn't been there when he laid down. He batted the sleep from his eyes and forced himself to sit up, feeling his joints groan in protest as he did.

“Stiff?” He heard Knox before he saw him, standing in the doorway behind him. “I told you you should’ve gone to bed.”

“I’m fine,” Charlie protested, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. He saw stars.

“Did you at least sleep well?”

“I think so. What time is it?”

“I can tell. You’ve got red marks all over your arms,” Knox observed. “It’s almost six. The others ate bagels for dinner, so you didn’t miss much.”

“Everyone else is awake?”

“Mhm. They’re outside. That’s where I came from. Just wanted to check on you.”

Charlie crossed his arms over his chest one at a time, yawning as he stretched. “I’ll be out there in a minute.”

“Gonna do anything about your hair?” Knox asked, amused. Charlie’s hair was thrown forward wildly and flat against the back of his head.

“Not if I’m just going to get it wet anyway.”

“Good point.”

He changed into swimming trunks, forgoed a shirt, and, once on the porch, slapped some sunscreen on his bare chest, back, stomach, and arms, rubbing what was left on his face and neck.

“You’re going to get sunburn on your legs,” Ginny scolded him.

“A risk I’m willing to take,” he said flippantly, running out to meet her by the dock.

Ginny sat on the dock with her feet in the water. She kicked it at him with a flick of her toes.

“Bitch,” he said, not unkindly, and she threw her head back in amusement. “It’s really not *that* funny.”

“I think it is,” she said. Then, innocently tucking her hair behind her ears, she asked, “How does eighteen feel?”

“The same,” Charlie admitted. “I don’t know what I was expecting, really.” He waded into the water, letting it lift him and take the weight of gravity off of his shoulders. He floated on his back and closed his eyes, light pouring red through his eyelids. “The thought is nice. I can legally buy cigarettes, I guess. Exciting.”

“You smoke?”

“Nope.”

By the time the others went to bed, Charlie was wide awake.

He did try to sleep, tossing back and forth beside Knox for what might have been an hour or two. He’d tried sleeping in pajamas but found it too hot; he wore his swimming shorts, uncertain how comfortable he felt laying beside Knox in anything tighter. The curtains were drawn and it should have been pitch black but his eyes had adjusted, vague shapes and suggestions of figures floating around him, disconnected as if rising above a black fog. His mouth was dry.

Restlessness pervaded and sleep eluded, so he went to the kitchen.

The clock above the window told him it was only sixteen minutes past eleven. A wave of irritation and thirst came over him, and he moved, like a wraith, to the sink, turning on the faucet and cupping water in his hands. The kitchen window was open and someone’s music floated in, unintelligible, from across the water. It must’ve been loud, loud enough for him to hear it. The thought of being any nearer to the source made him nauseous, but he opened the door, padding out onto the porch in his bare feet.

Despite the darkness, it was still considerably warm, the lake receding before him. In fact, all distance seemed to stretch out in front of him infinitely, and he wondered if he wasn’t dreaming after all—his senses all seemed foreign to him and out of use, the moon on the water unnaturally sublime.

The music now, too, came to him in startling focus. Though it was still distant and muffled, it was familiar to him, like a song from your childhood that somebody, faceless and remote, used to sing as a lullaby.

He walked down to the dock, where it was even clearer, and sat down on the end. Any sleepiness that had lingered within him disappeared as soon as he put his feet in the water. He stared blankly at his reflection.

Had he ever been so spontaneous? For someone so well-known for doing most things extempore and 'off-the-cuff,' as they say, Charlie couldn't recall a time, until very recently, that he'd ever been able to live even slightly without thinking. The *heel incident* of the previous calendar year, as Charlie would take to calling it in years following, had not been half as unrehearsed as his peers might have believed. Still, something had shifted, and he remembered Keating imploring him not to forget *why* he'd done it, and really, he couldn't. He felt no shame, and indeed felt no need for guilt. That familiar, nagging anxiety he was so used to feeling was a voice that was not his own, and somehow he had banished it, almost entirely, from his mind.

A voice from the porch. "Charlie?"

For some reason, Charlie could not rouse himself enough to turn, or to reply, or to give any signal that he had heard him. It was Knox, of course—because of course it was, of course it was him, why *wouldn't* it be—?

"What are you *doing* out here?"

Unable to justify ignoring him any longer, Charlie nodded his head vaguely. "Couldn't sleep. What are *you* doing out here?"

"The same." Charlie heard the rustling of fabric and Knox sat down beside him, shirtless, wearing loose sleep shorts with an untied drawstring. "Too hot."

"Yeah," he replied, and in the same second knew it was a half-truth.

"I guess the offer to throw you in the lake still stands," Knox said, leaning bodily against him. He was smiling.

"Thanks," he said wryly. "Are we the only ones awake?"

"I think so."

Charlie glanced sideways at him, then over his shoulder, before lifting himself and then, after a moment's consideration, dropping himself into the water.

“What are you doing?”

“Swimming, dumbass.”

“In the dark?”

“Yeah. So?” Charlie folded his arms on the wood, his chin on his wrist. He tilted his head up at Knox playfully. “Get in.”

He shook his head. “I’m in pajamas.”

“You’re in shorts. Get in.” Charlie grabbed his ankle and tugged.

“You don’t think you can drag me in, do you?”

“Of course I don’t. I’m trying to encourage you.”

He rolled his eyes, swatting aimlessly at Charlie’s hand when he reached up to grab his wrist.

“Coward.”

“ *Charlie* .”

“ *Get* in the water. Consider it your birthday present to me.”

Exasperated, he finally took hold of Charlie’s flailing hand. The latter’s arm went instantly limp. “Fine.”

Charlie grinned and squeezed his hand before kicking off. “Thanks, Knoxious.”

He dropped himself into the water and Charlie returned, ruffling Knox’s dry hair with a dripping hand. “Stop it, Wanda.”

“ *No.* ”

He was so close he could see the perspiration on Knox’s upper lip.

“Do you hear that?” he asked unexpectedly. Beneath the surface, their limbs tangled involuntarily, as they both paddled to keep their heads above water.

“Do I hear what?”

“Somebody’s playing music,” he said, looking around himself with furrowed brows. “Sounds like Springsteen.”

“Is that what that is?”

“My mom plays it all the time. Definitely Springsteen.”

Charlie nodded.

“The water feels nice, doesn’t it? You were right,” Knox said sheepishly, with one of his shy smiles. He remembered the first time he saw it, on a much younger, rounder face; it had matured and grown handsome as Knox had. As they both got older. “It feels nice. Doesn’t it feel nice?”

Can he feel this ? Charlie wondered. *Does he know what he’s doing when he looks at me like that?* “It’s cooler in the water,” he replied evenly.

“Your hair’s gotten longer,” Knox remarked, running a curious hand through it. He was too close, and being far too intimate, and Charlie felt like laughing. It threatened to erupt from his fizzing chest like one of those geysers in the west. *Yellowstone* . Something like that.

“I need to get it cut.”

“No,” he said, letting it fall easily between his fingers. “I mean, maybe. But not yet. You look…you look like yourself.”

“I’ve never had hair this long. Maybe when I was a kid, I don’t know. You didn’t know me then.”

Knox tilted his head. “I just mean to say—that is—that it suits you.”

Even in the water, where they were the same height as they half floated, half treaded, Charlie felt very small before Knox’s perspicacious eyes. It wasn’t unlike the way Todd used to look at him when they’d pass afternoons together by the lake back at school; in his memory it was a different world entirely, icy and gray, the color of Todd’s eyes. They were like mirrors, he realized, that was what it was. They reflected yourself right back at you and were always the color of the sky.

Knox’s were different. They were not mirrors, but they made him feel seen all the same; a testament to how much Charlie had always shared with him, and he was reminded, sharply, that their intimate knowledge of each other went both ways.

“I’m sorry,” he heard himself say.

Knox's mouth was pulled into a thin, thoughtful line. "You're sorry?" he repeated. "For what?"

"I haven't been completely honest with you."

He blinked at him.

"For a while, actually," he admitted. "I have something to tell you."

Knox stared, looking as though he was very deep in thought. There was no sound but the muffled Springsteen and the gentle, quiet movement of the water around them. The porch light was on—Knox must have turned it on when *he* came out, because Charlie didn't—but beyond that, the only light available was a pale half-moon and the clearest band of stars that Charlie had ever seen.

He cleared his throat. "I should probably clarify, first—" he averted his eyes. "I *also* like girls, okay?" But he didn't *get* to continue.

The dock was suspended in the water by a pair of wooden posts. Charlie's back was against one of them in half of a second.

He had never before considered the difficulties associated with kissing while treading water. Confronted with the situation now, he realized continuing to tread wasn't an option and in an unbidden springing motion he wrapped his legs around Knox's waist, threading his fingers through damp curls. Eyes closed; lashes fluttering against his cheek. There were two hands tight on his hips and Charlie realized, foggily, that Knox must be tall enough to touch the bottom.

Matters progressed. Springsteen faded out, and Belinda Carlisle began to sing somewhere around the lake.

If this was a movie , Charlie thought, *I wouldn't be able to hear the music.*

The door leading to their shared room creaked when they opened it. Knox was esurient, insatiable; surprising for one typically so withdrawn as he. He took and Charlie gave freely, his back against the mattress and Knox everywhere above him.

They must have kissed like that for hours, moving against each other

like complimentary currents, sparking hot when they touched.

Charlie woke up with Knox's head cradled against his chest.

"The week's more than halfway over," Ginny complained that morning, spreading cream cheese on half of a bagel. "You're taking us back to school on Sunday, right?"

"That's the plan," Knox said. He'd been mostly quiet all morning: Charlie had a few guesses as to why, but he said nothing, choosing instead to smirk into his mug as he took a drink. "That's not for four days."

"Three, if you don't count Sunday," she lamented. "I don't want to go back."

"We're almost done," Charlie said, between sips of burnt coffee. "With school, I mean. We graduate in May."

She shrugged and licked the excess cream cheese off of the butterknife vulgarly. Charlie wrinkled his nose. The night before, he'd feared, for the terrifying space of a few minutes that it took him to fall asleep, that Knox wouldn't look him in the eye the next day. His fears proved to be unfounded as they shared an extended, amused glance over Ginny's antics. They were both sitting at the breakfast table, across from each other, with the magazines from the living room stacked between them.

"That's about two months from now, almost exactly," he emphasized as he looked away. "May twenty-sixth."

She dropped the knife in the sink and turned around, bagel-half in hand, as it clattered. "I guess so." She sat on the counter rather than bother to find an extra chair.

"Then we're free. Off to college in the fall, though," Knox pointed out. "I'm just glad I get to stay here. In New England."

Charlie nodded in silent, attested agreement. Their eyes met again, hooked, and lingered.

A moment of relative silence passed by them before Ginny asked,

loudly, “Do we not have any bug spray?”

“Bug spray?” Knox shook his head. “No. Why? Did you get bit?”

“ *I* didn’t,” she replied testily. “Charlie, what’s on your neck?”

That dreadful eye contact again before, suddenly, Chris and Todd came in, flurriedly, from the hallway. Todd was fully clothed; Chris had a towel wrapped around her torso and her hair was wet. Their eyes were round.

“What’s wrong?” Charlie stood quickly as he said it, pushing his chair out behind him. It groaned in complaint.

“There’s a *wasp* ,” Chris said, in a loud and affected whisper. “In the bathroom.”

Knox looked sideways at Charlie before sighing and reaching for one of the magazines.

On the last day it rained.

When they made it to Welton it was actually sort of snowing and raining all at once, and four of the five tumbled out—all except Knox —to get their things from the trunk.

“What’re you doing?” Charlie asked, leaning against the hood on the driver’s side and peering at Knox through his rolled-down window. “Taking the car around?”

He shook his head. “I need to return it,” he said. “Take it back to my dad.”

“You don’t live far.”

“No, you’re right, I don’t. It’s why I’m doing him a favor so we don’t have to deal with getting it later.”

Charlie tilted his head. “Since it’s *such* a long drive—” he said, and Knox was already grinning.

“Yes, you can come with me.”

The Overstreets lived in a brick house not unlike most of the other buildings in the area. It wasn't small but it wasn't quite large, either: two stories, symmetrical windows, charming white concrete trim. There was an American flag waving proudly from its bracket set beside the door—Charlie had always thought it had that familial *Americana* charm about it. It was comfortable and always filled with people. Mrs. Overstreet's yellow rose bushes were preparing to bloom, lined up in perfect hedge-like rows in the front of the house, and Charlie saw that she'd planted daffodils and hyacinths for the early spring season.

She opened the door for them the second their feet touched the first concrete step of the front porch.

"What a dreary day!" she said lightly to Knox. She was a blonde, that's the first thing anybody noticed about her, though whether it was natural or not was harder to say. She and Knox were the same height, had the same nose, and the same exaggerated head tilt they used for emphasis. He was more like his father in every other respect. "Oh my goodness, you brought *Charlie* . Come in, come in, I wanna hear *all about* your trip."

She gestured rapidly for them to come inside. "Your father has to do something with the air conditioning unit," she said forcefully. "It broke on Monday—Ron, get down here. Knox and Charlie are here."

Knox's father came downstairs, owlish glasses balanced low on his nose, wearing maroon slacks and a wide blue tie over a thin striped starch shirt. His dark eyes lit on Charlie and he grinned.

"Good God, I haven't seen you in ages, son. Drop in and say hello to an old man once in a while, won't you?"

Charlie couldn't help but smile. "Sorry, sir. Busy year."

He clapped his son familially on the shoulder before shaking Charlie's hand. "How'd you boys like the lake?"

"It was great," Knox said, a little too quickly; his parents didn't notice.

"You two should stay for dinner," his mother cut in. "I'm making matzah soup."

It was only one o'clock, and (according to Knox) 'dinnertime' to his mother meant early evening.

“Sure,” Know said, nudging Charlie’s foot with the toe of his shoe. “That’d be amazing.”

“Make yourself at home, dear,” Mrs. Overstreet said to him. “Knox, why don’t you boys go upstairs for a few hours? Your father can take you both to the school after dinner.”

“Sounds good.”

Knox took his hand halfway up the stairs, out of sight.

“I’m damn glad those boys have each other, Lina,” Charlie heard Mr. Overstreet say, voice muffled, from downstairs. “Who knew that skinny boy Knox brought home back in the seventh grade would shape up to be a lifelong friend like that?”

Charlie kissed him on the landing, pushing him against the baluster with his hands on his chest.

He called home from school that night. The phone rang eight times before somebody picked it up.

“Hello?”

“Mom,” he said, too quietly. His mouth felt dry. “It’s Charlie.”

“ *Oh* .” She cleared her throat. “How are you, hon?”

He shifted uncomfortably, leaning against the wall. *Does she know I’ve been gone?* It was possible she didn’t, all things considered; Charlie didn’t think the school cared to check on any of the students who stayed at school over spring break. “I’m fine.”

“Your father’s in Detroit. He said to wish you a happy late birthday. I tried to call you on Wednesday but nobody took a message.”

“Sorry. I must’ve been outside,” he lied, slowly, before deciding it was harmless enough to add, “I was at Knox’s earlier.”

“Why’s that?”

“He needed to get something from home.”

A beat of silence. “How are his parents, anyhow?”

“Great,” he told her. “They’re great. She—his mom—made us dinner.”

“That’s very sweet of her.”

“I thought so.”

Neither of them said anything else for a few unbearably long minutes. A shrill, girlish laugh erupted in the background.

“Well, if that’s all, Charlie, I’ve got some of my girlfriends over tonight,” she said. “Don’t forget to start studying early for your finals.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She hung up the phone.

He walked the short distance back to his room, at the end of the hall by the phone, and found Cameron waiting by the door.

“Sorry,” he said, quickly. “Was that your folks?”

“My mom.”

“Oh.” He shook his head. “Nice talk?”

Charlie barked a laugh. “ *No.* God, no. She hung up on me because she has friends over.”

“Does she know you’ve been gone?”

“Doubt it. They don’t care anymore. Thank god, they don’t care anymore.”

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 8: the end (almost)

Chapter Summary

late march, april, and early may, 1989

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For Charlie, the last two or so months of school became in hindsight a mesh of images floating indistinctly among a sea of term papers, studying for final exams, and attending tennis games he was no longer a part of. In the midst of all this he spoke to Keating several times, at first on Todd's behalf (he got sick around the first week of April and had to miss a few days of practice) and then whenever he saw him. He spoke to his own parents very little. Neil and Ginny were busy—fitfully so, with their spring show coming up rapidly—and he spent most of his free time with Knox and Todd.

Despite no longer being part of the team, Charlie still frequently passed the time down at the courts, helping Todd practice when he asked but more often going by himself. In fact it was during those lonely hours that he encountered Keating all those other times—once or twice even playing a game or two, back and forth—and once Keating had asked him, with palpable concern, why he'd quit in the first place. Charlie shrugged.

He looked at him, light eyes beneath alarmingly expressive brows. "You were always a good friend to Mr. Anderson. You're a real team player, Charlie."

Knox and Chris turned out alright, all things considered. Chris joined their weekly study groups, though that was mostly on account of Ginny inviting her. Charlie saw the two of them together a time or two, actually, while waiting for Neil outside the theater, holding hands and being generally closer than any two friends ought to be. He and Knox weren't much different, though.

Cameron was absent from the dorms every Tuesday and Thursday for debate club meetings—Charlie had always thought it was a fitting occupation, but only now could he truly acknowledge that he was probably rather good at it—leaving Charlie in an empty room for about two hours after classes ended for the day. Awkwardly at first,

becoming increasingly more at ease, Knox spent those afternoons with him.

“How long have you known?” Knox had asked, on the first Tuesday back at school after that *enlightening* spring break. The two of them were sitting on Charlie’s bed, Knox leaning against the headboard, Charlie leaning on Knox. Kisses stalled to make way for conversation.

“Known *what* ?”

“That you—uh, you know, that you liked—?”

Charlie smiled and shook his head, pressing his cheek against Knox’s shoulder. “Guys in general, or you?” He didn’t have to look up to know that Knox was flushed red, but he did, half-crawling into his lap to look him in the eyes.

“Well, both,” Knox said, slowly, placing a timid hand on one of Charlie’s hips. “I’m guessing guys in general probably came first?”

“Nope. You.”

“When was this?”

Charlie knew better than anybody that undoubtedly he’d fostered this more-than-friendly affection for Knox for years, long before he’d really understood it; he told Knox the only thing he could really answer for, which was when he *did* realize it. He put his hands on Knox’s chest and stared at them, as if deep in thought, before returning, in a deadpan, “October. November, maybe.”

“Really?” Knox tilted his head. “That’s about when I started dating Chris. November. Weird how that works out, huh?”

“Funny coincidence,” he said, sarcasm dripping in his tone; understanding dawned on Knox’s face and he laughed.

“Well,” he said, after a moment, “I don’t know what I’ve been thinking. Maybe I thought Chris would make me forget the way I felt about you.”

Knox’s voice betrayed his shyness; for someone who adored romance in all its forms, Charlie found him to be diffident (but willing not to be) when it came to expressing it himself. Even his weakest attempts were sweet, as he performed them with the confidence of somebody who knows that his feelings are wholeheartedly returned, and of

course they were. Charlie pressed their foreheads together and Knox took his chin in his hand, kissing him fully and *oh,* Charlie thought, *this is it, isn't it?*

Transient summertime girlfriends, already faint in his mind, paled and almost vanished entirely when set beside Knox. It would be *laughable* to compare the friendly kiss Ginny had given him at the lake to this.

Ginny had known almost immediately about Knox and Charlie—he would have told her, anyway, if she didn't, but she'd had a few ideas about that "bug bite" from the start.

The five of them—Ginny, Neil, Chris, Todd, and Charlie—were walking back after rehearsal less than two weeks after the fact (Charlie, Chris, and Todd had made a habit of going with them if they weren't busy). *A Midsummer Night's Dream* had quickly become Charlie's favorite Shakespearean play, if only because Neil was such an animated Puck.

He was mindlessly tossing a metal bottle cap in the air and catching it as they walked. He found it on the ground ("Charlie, you're gonna get *tetanus* or something") and Neil kept trying to get him to hand it over. He'd always had a special affinity for random trinkets such as that—trouble is, so did Charlie.

"Find your own, Perry."

As they walked they naturally divided into groups, Neil and Todd lingering a few paces behind and Chris, Ginny, and Charlie leading the way stridently. That was when she prompted him.

"So, Charlie," Ginny said. "That wasn't a bug bite on your neck, was it?"

Chris tilted her head when he replied in the negative, so as to say that no, it wasn't.

"So what *was* it?"

The girls seemed prepared to stop walking to talk about this development, but Charlie kept walking, unphased. They followed.

“Not a bug bite. Not to my knowledge,” he said, grinning. That early spring evening had embedded him with the same sort of nonchalant perversity that had inspired him the previous autumn. They were transitional seasons—life felt less fixed, and nothing would ever matter until the harsh heat of June poured over him and he was walking, cap and gown, out of those doors for the last time and the torrent of adulthood came down on him even harder.

“Did you hurt yourself?” Chris asked, with hesitant concern, and Charlie shrugged.

“I did not.”

“And it’s not a bug bite?”

Ginny snorted. “Unless Knox *is* a bug.”

Neil and Todd overheard, of course. Charlie waved away their questions craftily, but he believed they understood.

“That’s how *they* found out,” Charlie explained, breathless, watching Knox undo the buttons on his shirt with amazing deftness. “Ginny doesn’t know when to shut up.”

He shook his head, laughing. “That’s just like her, isn’t it?”

They were in Charlie’s room again, on a Friday. Cameron was gone—hanging out with Meeks and Pitts, maybe, or staying late in the library. It wasn’t the smartest idea Knox had ever had, Charlie had to admit—Cameron could be back any minute—but he could be very persuasive when he spoke with his hands.

Knox kissed him again, and again, and *again* , and Charlie held onto his shoulders like a lifeline, and, as was becoming the theme, quickly forgot about anything else.

Some time passed—it could have been a few minutes or twenty—before Cameron *did* materialize, most unfortunately, in the doorway; Charlie was sitting on his desk, back to the wall and Knox standing between his legs.

Later Charlie found himself apologizing to his roommate for about the

fifth time. A choked " *sorry—?* " was all Cameron could manage when he'd first appeared, and Charlie had been echoing him at intervals since, sitting cross-legged on his bed, doing and saying very little. Knox had left rather soon after the incident; Charlie thought it was wise.

"It's fine," Cameron said—another repetition—and went back to pretending to have homework to do.

"You aren't going to *say* anything?"

He turned to look at him (bless him, he had the courtesy to be blushing just as much as Charlie still was) with a raised eyebrow. "Why would I?"

"It's against the rules," Charlie said, almost mockingly, before adding, "and most people's moral codes."

"You don't care about the rules," he said flatly. "I've got other things to worry about—whether or not boys are kissing boys, who cares? Just—please—" this he said with difficulty "—not on *my* desk."

"It wasn't your desk."

"This time," he said, and Charlie rolled his eyes. "Look, really, I don't care, but you two really should be more careful. Could've been somebody else."

"'Somebody else' should learn how to knock."

"Good luck with that."

"You could, at least."

Cameron had fixed him with an impressive glare, and Charlie stared back, until the ridiculousness became too much for either of them to bear and they both began to laugh.

Charlie sighed. "Well, that was exciting." He slid from his perch on the foot of his bed, walking over to his desk to straighten everything out.

"Screw it all," said Cameron, waving a freckled hand in the air. "Wanna play a game of chess?"

The Welton Academy Drama Department's performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was, as Charlie would profess time and time again (perhaps a bit hyperbolically), the best play he'd ever seen.

Neil and Ginny emerged after the show only to be showered with gifts. Chris was giving out roses to the cast (and a kiss on the cheek to one actress in particular) and Neil looked absolutely radiant, Charlie thought, as he accepted a bouquet of flowers from Todd.

"I don't know how you guys do it," Knox confessed, angling his head to get a look at the unlit stage lights. "It was *great* ."

"As always," Charlie added, trying (unsuccessfully) to repress a wide smile.

Neil looked close to tears. "I just can't believe—for the last time—"

Charlie pulled him in for a hug. " *God* , Neil," he said. "You're going to make me cry, too."

The next morning meant tennis practice. Not for the whole team, of course—it was a Sunday morning. No, it was just Todd and Charlie.

Charlie would be hard-pressed these days to knock the racket out of Todd's hand. He met all of Charlie's attacks with impressive defense and what's more, he was a fantastic server, and he was sure-footed; by all accounts a competent opponent. He was not the same Todd Anderson that Charlie had met last September. He was confident, and happier than ever.

At the moment he lacked just a little bit of that confidence. Though they had established a good volley, Todd could look directly at Charlie and see through him.

"Snap out of it, Anderson," Charlie shouted playfully as he hit the ball. "You're in some kind of funk."

"I'm sorry," he said, adjusting his grip seconds before returning the hit. "Just tired, I guess— *damn it* ."

The ball had hit the very edge of his racket, sending it parallel to the net rather than across. Charlie tilted his head, hands on his hips, as Todd went to retrieve it.

“Something keep you up late?” he asked.

“No," he replied, a touch too defensively.

Charlie raised an eyebrow. “*Oh*. Some *one* , then?”

The way Todd averted his eyes told him all he needed to know.

"Well, then,” he said, rolling his shoulders and twisting the racket in his hand. “Listen, can you give me fifteen more minutes? You’re really doing great, Todd."

He seemed to consider it. "Yeah. I can do that."

Charlie winked at him. "Go ahead and serve.”

Knox caught Charlie by the arm on his walk back from that impromptu Sunday practice, and beyond the wave of deja vu, he was aware of the pleasant swell in his chest at the sight of him.

“Oh, hi,” he said, as he recovered from the surprise. “What’s up?”

“Got a minute?”

“For you?” The question answered itself.

Knox grinned. Charlie wished he could kiss him right there, under the billowing clouds and hawthorn blossoms. The risk was overwhelmingly high and, perhaps foolishly, he might have done it under some other circumstances, under skies even more expansive than these, with more impressive mountains rising against the wind.

“I have something for you,” he explained. “A gift.”

It was then Charlie noticed a parcel in his hand—something soft, not too big, wrapped in brown paper. “What for?”

“Your birthday.” He licked his upper lip nervously. “I know it’s almost

a month late, but I wanted it to be right."

Sitting on sandy earth amid a grove of low-lying pines near the water, Knox let him open it. He untied the flimsy string, throwing sideways glances at his companion.

"Is it alive?"

Knox laughed. "No. You'd be able to tell if it was alive, anyway."

"Is it *dead* ?"

"It's fabric, Charlie," he said, exasperated. He bumped shoulders with him genially. "Come on. Open it."

Charlie pulled apart the paper, which had folded with considerable care around a pair of socks—blush pink, in the crew style, completely plain save for a faint floral design set in a slightly lighter tone. They were soft to the touch.

"A replacement," he explained. "You told me your mom took the ones Ginny gave you, right?"

Charlie nodded indistinctly.

"I know they're not really like those, but I figured it wasn't really about the *socks* and more so about the—well, just the—"

"I love them," Charlie confessed. "I love you."

For a moment Knox was wide-eyed and a little red, but he drew Charlie from his cozy stupor with a kiss on the cheek, concealed as they were by the pines.

"I love you, too," he said quietly, before reaching into his pocket. "That's not all. I found this for you, too."

He procured—and this was the better half of the gift, Charlie would always say, but it wasn't easy to choose—a photo, a little aged but looking alright considering, of the two of them, twelve or thirteen years old, standing in front of Knox's house. It was from the first summer they'd ever known together, probably taken using Mr. Overstreet's then-brand-new Nikon. Charlie had passed two weeks that summer with Knox's family, and understood for the first time, in heartbreaking clarity, what his parents could have been.

He'd never been the same since.

“Is this the original?” he asked distantly. Knox told him that it was. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything.”

He hugged Knox tightly, careful not to bend the photograph.

It was around that time that finals and graduation took a step back from the forefront of everybody’s minds to make room for prom.

Prom was at the end of the first week of May and Charlie realized that he’d have to ask somebody soon if he planned on asking anybody at all. The obvious option, Knox, was out, at least when it came to really going ‘together,’ and he was about to give up on the idea entirely when Chris approached him one day during lunch with her ‘brilliant idea.’

“Since you and Knox are *together* —”

“Not so loud, Noel.”

“Sorry—Charlie, let me finish,” she said, grabbing his wrist when he tried to stand up. “And *Ginny and I* are, well, you know—”

Charlie stared at her blankly. This wasn’t news to him. “What’s your point?”

“Gin and I thought it’d be fun to pretend to go as couples. You know, Ginny and Knox and you and I or the other way around.”

“The other way around would probably be smart.”

She shrugged. “Point is—that’s the plan. Are you in?”

He was.

Other preparations for the dance were more mundane, in Charlie’s opinion—getting a tux was just a matter of renting an absurd pink ensemble from a place in town (the shirt was white, at least, and the bowtie was black) and there was no question of transportation—but he was excited, at least in some way, to dance to ridiculous music and drink bad punch; if his friends were there, even the most asinine and

underwhelming events could become sublime.

There was one last junior varsity tennis game the week before prom and Charlie went, as per usual, and Knox came along.

“You know,” he said, as they both observed Todd’s much-improved gameplay, “I don’t think I ever missed one of your games.”

Charlie smiled. “No,” he agreed. “Not one.”

Neil was on Charlie’s other side, too enraptured to hear them.

Not long after the game ended, Charlie was seeing double. More accurately, he saw Todd with a taller version of himself standing with his hands in his pockets. The taller Todd looked to be about twenty, and his hair was a shade darker, but the family resemblance was apparent. They were talking animatedly for a moment, and the man smiled as Todd hugged him.

Knox followed Charlie as he descended the stairs, a finger hooked inconspicuously through one of his belt loops so as not to lose him. Todd’s face was flushed from the exercise and, no doubt, from the pride of victory.

“Todd!” Charlie called, and he turned to look at him.

“Did you *see* that?” he said. Charlie was unsure if he’d ever seen him smile that much. “I *won* . I mean, we all did, but did you see?"

“I knew you would, Todd."

He shook his head. “Where’s Neil?”

A jubilant voice at Charlie’s shoulder confirmed that he was right behind him; he pulled Todd into a tight embrace that was quickly reciprocated.

Todd laughed into Neil's shoulder. “Hold on,” he said. “Guys, this is my brother, Jeffrey.”

Jeffrey, as he was apparently called, held out a hand as if to shake somebody else’s, and Neil enthusiastically took it. “Todd’s told me so much about you. Did you really help build the set for *Romeo and Juliet* when you went here—? No, wait, did you actually win that award for coding a copycat *Space Invaders*? My friends, Meeks and Pitts— *wow* , they would *love* to meet you.”

Looking a little overwhelmed, Jeffrey glanced sideways at Todd before answering. “Yes, and yes…you must be...you’re *definitely* Neil, right?”

With Neil continuing on with his long list of questions, Charlie grabbed Todd’s arm.

“You never told me you had a brother,” he said, conversationally.

Todd shrugged. “You never asked.”

Oftentimes when recalling certain keystone events in modern life there is a tendency to unintentionally embellish and in general glorify what is in reality mediocre at best, especially when it is supposed to be very memorable, and while Charlie wasn’t immune, the memory of his senior prom stayed with him in sharp focus. The sixth of May, 1989, was a Saturday, and the dance started at seven o’clock. The four of them arrived at eight.

Part of the reason they were so late was that Ginny had insisted on all of them meeting in her and Chris’s room at four-thirty, which involved a lot of sneaking around in the first place, but it wouldn’t have mattered had it not been for several separate mishaps.

First, Ginny and Chris had spent longer than they’d expected on hair and makeup (they had done this in the girl’s room, leaving Knox and Charlie sitting in their room alone. Neither of them had gotten dressed yet—surely, they had time.

“How long does this usually take?” Knox asked him, drumming his fingers on his thigh.

“Don’t ask me. *I’ve* never done my makeup before.”

The two came back, hair raised and makeup bright. Ginny’s dress and matching eye shadow would have made the citizens of the Emerald City envious in all its green tulle glory. Chris’s dress was more understated, harkening back to nineteen-fifties simplicity but—more importantly—it was pink.

“We *match* ,” she told Charlie excitedly. “Isn’t that funny? How *cute* .”

Knox had said she looked like Sandy Olsson.

While all of this alone wouldn't have made them very late, it happened then that Ginny couldn't find her heels; she threw her hands in the air and declared that she ought to just wear sneakers.

"You wouldn't," Chris said, horrified.

"I would!"

She did.

Knox and Charlie dressed without issue, mostly—Charlie insisted on finding and wearing his pink socks and, for the life of him, could not figure out how to tie a bowtie.

"Let me," Ginny offered, and he recoiled. "It can't be that hard, can it?"

"I've never done this before," he lamented, as Knox looked at him sympathetically, a perfectly knotted bowtie under his chin. "Do you have a mirror?"

"Not in the room."

"Charlie," Knox interjected, not unkindly, "would you *please* let me help you?"

Defeated, he dropped his hands and let Knox tie it for him.

All of this had made them only about ten minutes late, but Ginny had a brand new digital camera ("From Christmas," she supplied) and wanted to take pictures.

"Come on, come on, let's go. Down by that one tree—where I tripped, Charlie, remember?"

Charlie wouldn't have traded those photos for an extra forty-five minutes at an unremarkable high school dance, or for the whole world, in a million years. Knox's tux was black but his tie and boutonniere flower were both a light blue. He wore a certain carnation ring on his right hand. In one of the photos, he'd ducked down and given Charlie a kiss on the cheek. Ginny promised him a copy.

The venue was downtown, near the theater and that sandwich place Charlie, Knox, and Ginny had visited before, but was unremarkable in every other regard. Upon walking in, they met Meeks and Pitts almost

immediately. Meeks, as a member of the student council, had helped organize dances in the past and was anxiously observing this year's committee. Pitts, of course, was simply along for the ride. They were wearing matching, black and white tuxedo suits; Meeks had on a yellow bowtie and Pitts had an untied purple one. His jacket was unbuttoned.

"Well, well," Meeks said affectedly when he locked eyes with Charlie. "Thought you weren't gonna make it."

"Just dropping in to say 'hi,'" he joked. The music was loud and even at the door he had to raise his voice to be heard. "Try not to psych yourself out too much tonight, got it? See you around."

The decorations were very standard. Some balloons, streamers…half empty glasses of punch that had been abandoned in favor of dancing. Speaking of, Neil was dancing with some girl—Charlie thought maybe he'd seen her before at rehearsal, or something—and, side by side with Ginny (Knox and Chris were dancing to some *Journey* song from the seventies that she liked) he found Todd sitting with Cameron, of all people, by the punch table.

Todd offered a meek wave. "Hello," he said.

"Neither of us have anybody to dance with," Cameron explained, and then added, "I don't want to dance. Don't worry."

"Oh, *boo* ," Ginny said dramatically. "You too, Todd? Come on, a little dancing won't kill you."

Todd looked not a little bit frightened, but Charlie grinned and gave him an encouraging nod. "It's fun. I promise."

He managed a smile as Ginny whisked him away. Charlie took his place sitting next to Cameron.

"This isn't my thing," Cameron explained over the noise.

"You're kidding."

"No," he said seriously, before going on, "Oh. It's a joke."

Charlie winked.

Todd and Ginny eventually returned and after a few dances with Charlie she, spurred on by the sight of a few other groups of girls

dancing together, said she would “be right back.”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to find Chris, duh.”

Which left him quite stranded, all things considered, on the flashy dance floor, “I’m Still Standing” fading out around him. Through the crowd of people, Charlie could see Neil (the girl from before had completely vanished) playing with a balloon in front of a very amused Todd.

“I see they’re playing throwbacks tonight,” came a voice over his shoulder, and he spun around to find Knox.

“Where have you been?”

“With Chris. Don’t worry, she found a new dance partner.”

Charlie snorted. “I know. She took mine.”

They stood together awkwardly as the song shifted. Kim Wilde. *Kids in America* .

“God, it’s hot in here,” Knox complained eventually. He gestured vaguely with his hand, letting it linger awkwardly in midair, as though wishing Charlie could take it. “Wanna step outside?”

“Please,” Charlie said, and they did.

The sidewalk was nearly entirely abandoned. Knox did take his hand this time, and before Charlie could protest he had whirled him around the corner, ducking both of them into an obscure little space between the venue and the sandwich shop (which was closed) that was obviously designed to have outdoor seating. Maybe they hadn’t brought it out for the summer yet, Charlie thought; maybe nothing mattered at all except for the sound of his and Knox’s laughter overlapping.

“I can still hear the music,” Charlie said emphatically. “It was loud as hell in there.”

“Seemed exactly like the kind of thing you’d like,” Knox said. “You know. Lots of things going on at once. You like that stuff.”

He shrugged. “Maybe with a little more dancing.”

Knox sniffed and looked out at the street. “So?”

“So.”

“Not a lot of people out here. Weird for a Saturday night.”

“It’s a small town.”

He nodded. The muffled music stretched to fill the space.

“Wait,” Knox said, eventually. “Hold on, I love this song.”

Charlie strained his ears. “Head Over Heels” had begun playing inside — *Tears for Fears* . He laughed. “Of course you do.”

“What does that mean?”

“Everything good, I promise.”

Knox shifted. “Well,” he said, a little red in the face, “Did you still want to dance?” His hand was outstretched, like the male lead in a rom-com, beckoning him to take a step forward and take it.

He didn’t have to ask twice.

When the two of them came back inside at the conclusion of their clumsy dancing, the prom committee was about to announce who’d won prom king and queen. Charlie, as it would happen, was the king.

It was an occurrence that surprised even *him* , actually, but apparently, the favor he’d won with the girls hadn’t wavered since the heel incident, and it was enough to boost him to first place in the ultimate high school popularity contest.

He had to dance with the prom queen, some girl on the volleyball team named Brenda. She was a friend of Ginny’s and was a good sport about the whole thing, and she was wearing a violet dress with the biggest sleeves Charlie had ever seen. Her boyfriend watched hawkishly as they met on the dance floor.

“Don’t mind him,” she said. “Guess this is only awkward if we make it awkward, right?”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be a perfect gentleman,” he assured her.

They both laughed when they realized that she was taller than him.

“Geez. Maybe you should try wearing heels again,” she suggested, half-seriously.

He wrinkled his nose. “No, probably shouldn’t. I can’t stand the blisters.”

Chapter End Notes

https://carryyourownbanner.tumblr.com/post/680139511354818560/collection-of-art-for-my-80s-au-dps-fic-how-soon
some arts for those of you who don't follow me on tumblr :>

Chapter 9: the beginning

Chapter Summary

late may and early june, 1989

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finals passed without incident, for the most part. A little bit of lost sleep and the fear of failure was nothing new—certain subjects were easier than others, and the rest left Charlie wearing a hole in the floor with his midnight pacing, much to Cameron's annoyance. Charlie felt sorry; his help made it all a little less stressful than it might have been otherwise, so Charlie tried to provide moral support in return. And, for the last two 'study group' meetings of the year, he invited Cameron.

Ginny learned that she could sneak into Charlie's dorm, too, now that Cameron was definitively sorted as 'friend.' She did, on several occasions; once with a pair of hair-trimming scissors.

"Let me cut it," she offered, as Cameron side-eyed her from his spot on his bed. "Charlie. We've got a week to go. 'T' minus 6 days until we're officially done with this place."

She was, naturally, in the middle of convincing Charlie that he desperately needed a haircut. "For the *pictures* ," she implored when he waved her off.

Due in part to Cameron's excitement for it that seemed double that of everyone else and in part to Ginny nagging him about his hair, Charlie had begun in earnest to grasp how near he was to graduation— *the end.* After three and a half weeks of barely keeping his head above the metaphorical waters of academia, Charlie was completely exhausted, and nothing weighed more heavily on him than the many 'unknowables' involving going home for the summer—least of all, the length of his hair.

Charlie glanced at the scissors. "Are you sure you know what you're doing with those?"

She shrugged—a very encouraging gesture—and Charlie shook his head. "It won't hurt you," she said.

Eventually, having run out of willpower or any real excuses, he conceded.

“ *He* won’t let me screw up your hair, pretty boy,” she said, pointing the scissors at Cameron. “You won’t, right?”

His poorly concealed amusement wasn’t very encouraging, but she took his silence as ascension.

“See? Sit down, Charlie.”

Charlie sat at his desk with his legs up and his ankle crossed over his knee. “I guess if you really screw it up the cap will cover it, huh?”

“Would you *be quiet* ?”

With an indignant huff he fell silent, picking at his cuticles. He felt lighter with each *snip* from the scissors (not that he’d admit that she was right—at least, not directly).

“Don’t worry,” he heard her mutter as she worked around his left ear. “I won’t make it look anything like before. Just cleaning it up for you.”

“What was wrong before?” Cameron asked, and to his credit he sounded genuine, but Charlie grimaced.

“It’s how my mom cut it,” he explained, picking at a hangnail until it bled.

These days, it seemed like Charlie got most of his exercise sprinting to the library at the sound of the bell to meet Knox for lunch.

“You got a haircut,” said Knox after giving him a careful once-over when he arrived. He was sitting on an elephant’s foot step-stool, sipping on a Capri Sun, with his back against the ‘D-E’ shelves of various encyclopedias and compendiums.

“Ginny.”

Knox laughed into his wrist. He’d been there when she brought it up the first time (and the second). “Right. Got it.”

Charlie looked around for any sign of the librarian before dragging another stool into the corner. He sat down beside him, cramming against him, brazen in secret. His chin on his shoulder. “I’m exhausted.”

“Poor thing,” he teased. He was probably wearing that sideways smile of his—the one Charlie used to be so jealous of. “You just have to survive one more week.”

“Mmph,” said Charlie as he eyed the pouch in Knox’s hand. “Do you have any more of those?”

Knox hummed, and Charlie felt it in his throat. “You think I’d forget about you?”

Sipping on his own Capri Sun Charlie allowed his mind to wander, eyes flitting over countless tomes. They were books he’d seen thousands of times, but had never really looked at. For the first time it felt like he and Knox were merely inhabiting the space rather than being part of it—after all, they were leaving. It was like coming back to his bedroom at home after being away at Welton, when the very fabric of the space as he remembered it all came apart like a ball of yarn. Suddenly it was four walls and a bed and a rug and a lamp and none of it was him, and with this realization any comfort it had once offered was occluded forever.

At some point Charlie became aware of Knox’s hand in his hair, no doubt examining the haircut for himself. Then he put a hand to his temple, twisting a curl between his fingers. “I’ve always cut my own hair,” he said. “Maybe I can help you out next time.”

“Yeah. Sure,” said Charlie airily, tilting his head so his cheek pressed against Knox’s shoulder. He let Knox comb his fingers through his hair…once, twice, over again, soothing him enough that he closed his eyes.

Well. He was leaving the reference corner of the library behind at Welton, but he wasn’t leaving Knox.

That afternoon Knox went with Charlie to his room to help him pack. It was a gesture that, though he didn’t like to admit it, was definitely

necessary, as Charlie had a tendency to get distracted by things he found—forgotten post-it notes ironically written as reminders, a library book he never returned, and all his tennis clothes, neatly folded in one of his dresser drawers.

Knox was the one who found them, actually, and did as much work distracting him as the clothes themselves. “Isn’t this a trip down memory lane,” he said flippantly, handing a set to Charlie to put in his suitcase. “Are you going to keep them?”

“Of course I am,” said Charlie. “Why wouldn’t I?”

“Just making sure," he assured him. "It's just that—I always liked the way you looked in those shorts.”

Charlie turned to see Knox’s face slightly reddened at the admission, but he seemed infuriatingly pleased with himself. He must've looked stunned, because Knox raised his hands innocently.

“*What*?”

It was hot outside that Saturday.

“I wonder what college will be like,” Ginny said, her freckles outstanding in the June sunshine filtering through the leaves. “Anything like this and I might die.”

Knox shrugged, laying on his stomach on the lawn. “Probably a lot of this.”

“Except you don’t have to sneak out,” Todd added quietly, squinting up at the sky. “You don’t have to be called out, either.”

The others were perhaps smarter than the four of them, staying securely within the air-conditioned buildings, but Charlie refused to complain about the heat. Besides, of course, they had the shade.

“Where are you going again, Todd?”

“CCV,” he said, his voice flat. He was sitting cross-legged, resting his chin on his palm. “At least it’s not far.”

Ginny crossed her legs at the ankles. “New York City sounds better to me than anywhere in this state,” she said. “Barnard is supposed to have a fantastic theater program.”

“Columbia’s sister school,” Knox added. “Guess I won’t be far away, huh?”

“Is that a threat?”

“I’m taking a gap year,” Charlie announced awkwardly.

The topic had come up before, but Charlie had managed to avoid much inquiry. Ginny shrugged, while Knox blinked at him. Todd looked almost envious, puffing a breath.

“You know what they say. Take your time,” Ginny said. She nudged Knox with the toe of her shoe.

“What about your parents—?” he said, looking up at him. “You won’t be home with them the whole time, right?”

Charlie chewed on his bottom lip. “They know what I’m doing. They think it’ll do me good to work,” he said. “Besides—if I work, I’ll get my own money, and then when I go to school…”

“They can’t hold anything over your head,” Todd said. Insightful as ever.

“Well,” Knox said, clearing his throat, “will you be far?”

Charlie smiled softly at him. “Only as far as a phone call.”

Knox stared. “Where are you going?”

“My dad knows a guy in Albany,” he explained, his smile turning wry. “Banking, of course. It’s really not ideal, but it’s a *paid internship* . Of course, he doesn’t know that I won’t use that experience, but…well.”

“When does it start?”

“August.”

Ginny was nodding. “I think it’s good. I think you need it, Charlie.”

A break. “I’m not even sure what I want to do,” he admitted. “I mean, I’ve never liked math or science all that much.”

“You’re a fantastic musician,” Knox noted, undoubtedly recalling Charlie’s saxophone phase in the ninth grade.

“Please.”

“You’re a good writer,” Todd said, and Charlie raised an eyebrow. “What? You made me peer-review all your essays.”

Ginny leaned forward, taking his face in her hands. “He’s a real European,” she said, her voice saccharine.

“You could do anything,” Knox told him, rolling onto his side. “Just don’t go too far away, okay? I’ll miss you.”

“I’d be lost without you.”

Ginny dropped her hands. “Ooh, he’ll be, like, your personal lawyer, for every-day life,” she said. “God knows you’ll need one, Charlie.”

He snorted. “And what would a lawyer need?”

“ *You* ,” said Knox.

Charlie graduated. There wasn’t much to it.

His parents were there, of course, but so were Knox’s, and they were cheering him on as he grinned at, shook hands with, and took his diploma from a very unamused Dean Nolan. Charlie watched him glance down at his shoes, undoubtedly checking for the telltale pointed toe of a high-heel. He wouldn’t find it, as Charlie had erred on the side of comfort and caution that day.

Todd had been the first of them to walk across the stage, and then Cameron; by the time Charlie was called, his hands already hurt from clapping.

Ginny was immediately after Charlie, of course. The very thing that had brought them together years ago, always being seated next to each other due to their names, allowed them to walk side by side to “Pomp and Circumstance” now, trying not to laugh at everybody in their graduation caps.

He listened for names he recognized. *Anthony Hopkins. Brenda Macnamara. Steven Meeks. Chris Noel. Jamie "Stick" Norman. Knox Overstreet.*

Knox looked absolutely ridiculous in his cap, but his smile was winsome; even Dean Nolan looked proud of him as he shook his hand.

Neil Perry . Charlie whooped and Ginny shushed him, but she, too, was flushed with pride for her castmate. *Gerard Pitts* .

Afterward, with families, students, and faculty scattered on the lawn, Charlie said goodbye to a favorite tennis coach.

His father offered him stiff congratulations, as though he viewed it as more of an obligation than an achievement, but his mother hugged him. She gave him a card, smiling as she told him something about a gift.

He left them in the crowd and Knox found him, pulling him into a tight embrace. His parents were nearby, ready to offer him their genuine congratulations.

"You'll call?" he prompted, putting his hands on either of Charlie's shoulders.

"As soon as I get home."

"You two," Mrs. Overstreet said warmly. "Please visit, Charlie."

"Yes, ma'am."

Saying goodbye to Cameron felt oddest of all. Charlie scribbled his home number on the back of the envelope. "If you need anything," he said.

Neil, he knew, would keep in touch. Todd had written his number in the back of Charlie's yearbook, next to where Chris had signed her name with a heart over the 'i' instead of a dot, alongside Knox's neat and lawyerly " *spring break, 1989 . knox.* "

The 'gift' his mother had mentioned was a car.

Charlie had asked about the red BMW offhandedly when they pulled into the driveway, thinking it was one of his relatives visiting, perhaps; he nearly fainted when his father handed him the keys. Ironic, he thought, the guards passing the keys to the prisoner.

It was brand new; an ‘88 M6. He was pleasantly surprised that it wasn’t black—his mother told him it was all they could find.

“I love it,” he said. Red, as Knox had told him once, was really his color.

He didn’t get a chance to drive it until the last week of June when he got a phone call from Knox. Did he want to go to Cape Cod with him? His parents had asked if he would. Yes. *Yes,* please. I’ll meet you there. What’s the address?

...

His collection of tapes is his singular passenger, in a box in the shotgun seat. With fifty dollars in his pocket and half of his belongings in the backseat, he’s ready to set out for the coast. It’s a three-hour drive. The soundtrack of his severance is The Smiths’ *Meat is Murder* —it’s the first tape he pulls from the box.

He leaves in the morning and drives with the windows down. He’s a focused driver, but he drives with the windows down and sings shamelessly along to the album. It’s less depressing than it used to be. He’s eager to let Welton fall behind him just as easily as the wildflowers he drives past on the MA-140, but somewhere between tennis practice, chess matches, and high heels, he stumbles.

He can take some of it with him.

Chapter End Notes

special thanks to my beta reader and good friend, citrusgothic. additional thanks to alex, my dpstwt mutuals, and anybody else who's ever dealt with my dps-related nonsense.

End Notes

i’m on twitter: @telling_tragedy

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